Monster Girl Saga Vol6

Monster Girl Saga - VI

Anonemoose

Chapter 84

“Do you know how I got this scar?”

The gnarled and muscular husk of a man said tipsily. He also spoke with a slur due to an old oaken pipe grit securely between his teeth; the putrid smoke of which billowed out and mixed with the scent of leftover mead. The way he swiveled in a massive nearly empty stein told the tale of the man's long lost sobriety.

He was a man who carried many scars, all from a life dedicated to combat and petty brawls. His light brown hair grew in patches, the result of innumerable burns and gashes which had ruined his scalp. Scars and pox marks likewise ravaged what could have once been a handsome face. With broad shoulders, gnarled sinew and knotted muscle, the man carried a hundred memories: A mercenary veteran of many battlefields.

A pair of dark brown eyes brimmed with violent intent and glared unflinchingly at the man seated across from him. And there was a man half his size; a squeamish lout dressed in finery befitting of his status. That did not fluster the drunken lunk, however. When his dining partner voiced no interest, or disinterest, he decided to show the scar anyways. With a free hand, he pulled his slovenly disheveled undertunic aside to reveal a hideous mound of white scar tissue on his right breast. The mere sight of it could induce phantom pain in all who looked upon it. And so, the younger man seated opposite of him looked away in disgust. Yet he could not help but bring his eyes back, the pull of curiosity demanded it.

That man with an ever present slick of sweat that oozed off his bald head, was his employer. The sphere of a head glistened like a beacon in the torch light of the dining room; it made it so he could not slink away nor make himself small enough to disappear. Oh, and how the man wished he could. The clothes he wore were also so pristine and unstained that he stuck out like a sore thumb. He had yet to even touch his stein and was already trying to slump back far enough to vanish underneath the table. He appeared like a baby compared to his guest, but the bald head, sunken brown eyes and wrinkles from years of being a neurotic mess made him appear twice his age. The man bore the mark of privilege which was made ever more apparent through comparison to the others gathered in the hall past the midnight hour.

More than three dozen other mercenaries crowded the main

floor below them. It was a collection of men and women from all backgrounds, but sharing a similar set of mannerisms that made the whole floor undulate with low class and base tavern banter. Gathered around was a band of disgraced soldiers, would be heroes, expelled students of arcane academies and ambitious former brigands. The only thing that brought them all together was a single banner: A silver banner. They were the Redeemer Company. A not so aptly named group of people composed of those seeking a second chance. All gathered under the promise and sponsorship from one of the largest and most powerful exploration outfits in the world.

“Well? Do you have an idea, Aaron?”

The mercenary was drunk, casual and ultimately obstinate. He refused to address the man by his proper title: Count Aaron of Shivering Bluffs, a vassal within the Duchy of Yaleria. But the Count could not bring himself to protest. He hid his shaking nerves by nodding his head unceasingly.

“I read your dossier—” the Count spoke carefully, remaining in control enough to not stutter or babble. “It's no doubt from the Battle of Eldgwine.”

The mountain of mangled muscle smiled eerily. Count Aaron swallowed hard and did his best to weather the pressure bearing down on him.

“I-I would not have paid such hefty premiums for your services if I didn't know your background, Nerick.”

“Yeah... Yeah” The mercenary captain Nerick nodded. “That's right. It was Eldgwine. But Aaron, did I ever tell you why I got this scar?”

Nerick's inflection caught Aaron by surprise. The thought of word games crossed his mind, but did not expect the hired muscle to play games like that. He would have never guessed the man was capable of it either. To ask why seemed inconsequential compared to the question of how. But that one simple word brought the dining hall to a grinding halt. The dozens which had been eating, drinking and making merry went dead silent. They were afraid and that fear seeped into the Count. He too went silent and his heart sunk into his gut.

That was once again taken as an invitation for the drunk to speak.

“Fifteen years ago,” Nerick said and exhaled deeply from his

nostrils. “It wasn't too long before that I was just a little punk. And before that I was just a kid who couldn't stand pushing a plow like father did ‘til the day I also died. So I ran off, got into fights and did grunt work around the Empire. I won some money with my fists and lost some the same way. Eventually got my chance when everything started going tits up. Good money too. Lot of limp useless pricks like you who needed heads pounded in... All so you line your pockets even more.”

Nerick took another long swig and emptied the rest of his stein. Had Aaron wished to lash back at the slight against him, he soon lost that chance. The mercenary slammed the empty mug onto the table with a crash. His captive audience flinched. Both table and stein sounded as though they were near shattering. The way his soldiers averted their eyes as they listened showed they had heard some version of this story before. Every one of them wanted to make their escape, but no one was brave enough to stand up and risk being singled out. Aaron had it worst of all, the fierce eyes from the captain which were once drunk were now brimming with hatred. The presence the man gave off kept the Count nailed to his seat.

“So for eight years or so I worked hard. Took my fair share of beatings and the occasional stabbing for my pay. Survived my first real battle. It was outside Listbern, just a small place down by the southwest coast. I had just gotten paid, and the booze kept coming—” He looked briefly at Aaron with a wry grin, “And the baker's daughter was mighty friendly like. Liked a man who was good with his hands eheheheee~.”

He wiggled his calloused hands, but just as suddenly the man's playfulness evaporated.

“So it was late. Almost dawn, but still dark out... When I take off out the back door of the bakery before her pappy comes home... I run into some—thing.”

The count's brow furrows. Certain words rolling of Nerick’s tongue rubbed the Count in the most uncomfortable manner. By now his heart was thumping, and not just from the smouldering pile of bile and anger seated just a meter away from him.

“I thought it was just some little kid. Just some street urchin. Except this was just a small little town, so that made no sense. Anyway, huddled by the refuse, feasting away at stale old bread after chasing off the rats was this kid. Hungry too. Starved. Dirty, but not

sickly. A browner shade of skin. Short red hair. Bright red. A black bandana wrapped around its head. Small too. Couldn't have been old enough for Rest Day classes at the Church."

Nerick leaned over, far enough to force Aaron to lean back. The putrid mix of beer and burnt herb assaulted the man's delicate senses made him wretch. At least he would have, if not for his body which was aware what would happen if he did.

"But when my buzz wore off a bit and my eyes got used to the dark... Looking right back at me were these eyes. Yellow. Bestial. I remembered something like it when I was a kid. You see, a travelling circus was passing through and I snuck in."

Nerick's face softened for a moment as it became filled with nostalgia.

"Thought I could stow away with em and get away from that damn farm. Crawled right up to this cage. In it was this big old lizard. A real long lizard. It was just laying there, waiting. Had its mouth open which was a long snout that had dozens of these razor sharp teeth. And its eyes, sick yellowy greens, had these black narrow slits... They were staring right at me. Hungry. Mad... Well, it jumped at me and banged its nose right up against the bars in front of my face. So I screamed, got caught, thrown back to my pappy and he beat the shit out of my behind... So here I am now, starting at this girl, eyes— Just — Like— That."

At last Nerick pulled back and sat back down in his chair. The count breathed easily, but not for long. When the mercenary reached for his empty stein, he grew angry and hurled it across the room. Now his tone shifted and his smouldering anger returned.

"Now, when I got a better look I see it's some girl. Almighty forgive me, but she was a cute little kid. Bit of a tomboy, but had the kind of face you see picking flowers puts it puts a smile on a face. But no. That don't last long. It had these scaly fin ears. And just like that lizard in a cage, she had these red scaled hands and feet. More like claws and talons rather. Thick boney scales, like armor. With sharp white boney points on em. And growing out from behind her was this tail. Wrapped in muddy old bandages, glowing bright red, like paper kindling in a fire. But I could see it well enough after a bit. IT was just like that beast's tail, boney, armored, red. And then I saw it, griped tight in her claw: A broken half of a sword. A big one at that too, half an arming sword that must have been taller than she was, if it weren't

broken that is”

The anger faded from Nerick's voice yet again, but Aaron nor the other mercenary were fooled into a false sense of security. The captain's anger was just coiling, like a spring, like a snake preparing to strike.

“... Now, what did I do?” He asked.

No one dared speak.

“That's right. Nothing. I was too drunk— too merry to care. Just got myself a good wetting of my dick in some stupid plump cunt and boozed out of my mind. Didn't think nothing of it at the time. A helpless monster kid, right in front of me. And I didn't do anything. I just gave her a dumb smile... And she actually smiled back. Two rows of sharp teeth, but I still thought nothing of it when I stumbled on my way.”

Against his better judgement, Aaron finally spoke out. His curiosity once again got the best of him.

“A-and this has to do with the scar how?”

Nerick glared long and hard at Aaron. He wasn't upset at his speaking out of turn, nor interrupting him. Rather, another wry smile crossed his face. Perhaps he was just pleased that the bald headed man was paying attention. Just like a snake, the rat had been hypnotized within striking distance.

“Eleven or so years later... Eldgwine. By now I had gotten second in command in the Haldoe brother's company. This was the biggest payout of my whole career so far. Two big shots, two Dukes, slugging it out over who owned what after two broads they had married to each other's families centuries ago. Hilarious, really. I didn't care though. It was time to get paid. Except I hear one family had gotten desperate. Lost a lot of men and knights because of some really generals. They started hiring on a certain type of mercenary. Monstrous ones. I didn't think much of it. They bleed just like anyone else. Some men were scared they're gonna get eaten, others were more afraid of their souls getting sullied to eternal damnation if they weren't killed and were taken alive... Still, I didn't care. Slapped some of the men upside the head and we set off. On that first day, the only day, we were ordered to do some recon. All that dirty work those nobles didn't want so they could ride into one another in glorious and honourable combat. The front line ran through 3 villages and a bunch

of farmer's fields... There was one village on the far left flank. A creek went through it, a deep one. Had a bridge over it... But no one had heard anything of it for a while. So the men and I go. Just about thirty of us. See what's going on. If we can hold it for the main force, we'd do that too. Get paid more for it too. Couldn't pass that up that chance."

Aaron noticed a sudden change. Nerick's eyes looked far past him. A dead expression lingered on the captain's face.

"When we got there, the whole place was burning. Now, we'd seen some smoke rising in the distance on the march over, but we didn't expect what we saw... Bodies everywhere. A lot of them burned. A lot of weapons just dropped, the ones using em had turned and fled. Tracks running in every direction. We weren't so easily spooked, so we kept going. And we saw the one thing that wasn't burned yet: The bridge. Standing on it was someone. Some girl. Some teenaged looking girl... Fire— Hot air rising all around. Long red hair tied up in the back with a ratty old black ribbon. Was like watching a whip in the wind. She had a tail. From it was the very fires of hell that burned all around us. Red scaled claws and talons. Tan skin with shadows from the flames billowing over her... I wasn't sure at first where the scales began and ended. There was a blood, a lot of blood. A lot of it wasn't hers. And I counted a javelin sticking out of her the of her thigh, four arrows in her back and a broken spear head in her shoulder. None of em seemed to bother her. She just stood there on the bridge. In a trance. I watched steam rise from her. Blood boiling. The wounds she had closing; cauterizing before my eyes. It was unnatural. Inhuman... Then she spotted us. We didn't stop until she turned to face us, and we got quite close. We were ready for a fight, but as hot as it were, our collective blood ran cold. I saw that pair of yellow bestial eyes turn on me. Dull, lifeless. I hadn't thought of it for all those years, but I knew those eyes. That's when it looked at me, and smiled back. I remembered those sharp teeth too. The girl was outnumbered thirty to one, but ran right at us. A lot of guys must have thought we were fighting a demon... A demon like you used to hear about a long time ago. A living fireball came crashing down on us. Years of fighting, it kept me steady, all my training kept me calm, feeling calm, but... But I remember that beast in the cage. Bad old memories came bubbling up from deep down inside. I felt like a little kid and that thing was leaping at me again. But there wasn't a cage this time, and there was hellfire all around. Those eyes and those teeth got closer. She was just too fast and... I panicked. Fell back on my heels."

Nerick gently tapped the white scar on his chest. He winced

uncomfortably when he did, something he sought to cure with another few deep puffs from his pipe. After letting a huge plume of smoke turn the room a deeper shade of blue, his anger began to rise again as his thousand-yard stare finally began to break apart.

“Missed my heart, just barely... Missed my spine... Just barely. But I felt the guard of her sword right up against my chest. It wasn't the icy touch of iron I'm used to. It was hot. Burning hot. Searing my entire body. For the first time, in a long, long time, I screamed. I hit the ground like a sack of potatoes. My vision started flickering. I could hear the men all around me fighting, screaming, running dying. I couldn't do a thing. My body just lay there. 'So bleeding out like this is how I die' is what I thought. But I got lucky, the heat of the blade must have cauterized the wound when she pulled it out... But it wasn't the same after that. It was an entire day before I could pick myself up off the ground. The battle had already been lost. I wasn't getting paid. My chest felt as though it were on fire and it never got better. I spent two years wandering about, like a homeless bum. I couldn't bring myself to the Church. I'd never sit around and pray all day. That'd be worse than going back home and ploughing that field all day every day forever. No. I'd never admit defeat like that... But what work can a broken mercenary like me?... Nothing till the Grand Master came along.”

The anger began to swirl and mix with an air of vengeance while courage bounded in his wounded chest.

“A big shot like him. Founder and head of the Silver Bannerman. He heard my story and sympathized with a man like me. Gave me a job. Showed me an herb his crew had found adventuring in the South-East continent years ago. It helps the pain go away. Makes it so even I can go on...”

Aaron had been listening the whole time, glued to his seat through fear and under the weight of the captain's voice. But now that anger was finally exploding. Nerick stood up suddenly and threw the whole table aside. It flew off the platform and onto the gather below. His men scattered to flee its path of destruction while the Count nearly soiled himself as the Mercenary Captain bore down on him. Nerick only had enough sense left to stop him from grabbing or hitting his employer. His face was right up to his, spitting, swearing and assaulting it with his putrid breath.

“So now you tell Me, when that very same creature, when that very same creature moseys in on your little ball, dressed all pretty like, with a big old smile on her face like all that never happened... That

I need to STAY CALM?”

Nerick's black eyes shot wide open and his teeth flared with primal anger. The Count cowered in fear. After dodging the flying table, his men thought they'd need to restrain him, lest he strikes the Count down. But they were petrified. With enough of that smoke running through his veins, his strength would be too much for them. The man's muscles were now capable of going above and far beyond their limits. Someone was bound to get hurt, or maybe killed.

“Perhaps he simply wishes that his investment not go waste, hmm?” A dull voice dared call out from the entrance to the dining hall.

Emerging from the dark was a tall and gangly man. His face was just as dull and expressionless as his tone and features were plainer still. A white lab coat fluttered behind him as the man walked with a peculiar gait. It was filled to the brim with confidence, which was an odd sight since he also walked with a slouch. His head was also completely bald, but clean and sterile. Otherwise, the man was utterly forgettable. People who had known him for some time would have difficulty in describing him.

Nerick turned away from the count and toward the lanky intruder, the full fury of his anger washed over the man with limbs like sticks.

Yes, I figured as much,” the man said monotonously under the mercenary's fierce gaze, “But I figured since the mood had already been damaged to such a degree, and that I was feeling rather peckish, my intrusion couldn't possibility make the situation worse.”

Either the man could not feel fear, or his confidence was so astronomical, so secure something hidden, that he did not fear the man who could snap his neck like a twig. None of Nerick's men stopped the man either, not even when he pinched an apple from one of the tables as he walked past. Ever since the two first met they hated one another. Anyone would be hard pressed to find two men so opposite of one another. Vee refused to bend to the mercenary's violent demands for respect and authority. Nerick despised Vee's work and everything he stood for. The professor was a man who sought answers and cared nothing for a blasphemy he committed to do so.

“Vee,” Nerick seethed.

The professor did not even acknowledge him and continued.

“So you lament your failure to act, in hindsight, that has led to your current sorry state?”

Nerick left the Count behind him, leaped off the raised platform and his weight creaked the floorboards below. He rolled the pipe grit between his teeth from one edge of the mouth to the other while glaring daggers at the slouched man. Vee did not stop until he was well within arm's length of the man. He took one bite out of the apple and spoke as he chewed.

“And you believe you have recently been robbed the chance for vengeance by our dear patron, Count Aaron?”

Vee never even looked Nerick in the eye which made the mercenary visibly angry. Even more furious than before.

“Aaron may be many things which are not flattering, but he is smart enough to understand the balance of risk versus reward. So too is he ambitious. Greedy enough to undertake quite the risk in order to capitalize on a claim to title 'Duke of Yaleria' from its current rightful head. I am no expert in such matters, but it was due to a distant relation with Duke Malco, no? He was to be wed to your sister before she passed away so tragically, no? Anyways, starting the fight you desire at this moment in time would most certainly be a detriment to his endeavors.”

“While that monstrous hell bitch is sleeping soundly somewhere above this very castle?” Nerick roared. “And you expect I remain calm? I have more than enough men and women here now—well equipped enough to deal with—“

“Have you ever thought of it another way, Mr. Nerick?” Vee interrupted.

The mercenary captain was shocked into silence, rarely had he ever met someone who wouldn't think twice who would speak to him like that. It through him off and his anger was slow to return, giving Vee the time he needed.

“You were very fortunate to have survived Eldgwine. Against the Thorn Knight no less. She had accumulated quite the reputation in the few short years she was active. But have you ever thought that you are fortunate to have escaped death twice?”

“What?” Nerick growled in furious disbelief.

“A salamander, even a child, armed with a broken sword versus a drunkard who is stumbling over his own feet... I would wager it to be a fair fight.”

The veins in Nerick's neck bulged and in a rage and he smashed his hand down onto a nearby table which splintered it upon impact. The people standing and seated nearby fled, Count Aaron flinched, but Vee did not budge at all. Professor finally look the man right in the eyes.

“Now you've survived possible death three times now. If you include Count Aaron restraining you during the party earlier tonight. However, the more you insist on this, the probability of your imminent demise quickly reaches one. I personally would not advise you to court death a forth time. She may well finally acknowledge your clumsy advances.”

Nerick's hand grabbed hold of his sword's hilt, and he had it half drawn before Count Aaron's voice finally cried out.

“Cease! Cease this, right now!”

No matter how much raged surged through him, Nerick was still a professional. When his employer actually gave and order as loud and clear as that, he had no choice but to obey. Meanwhile, Vee had still not so much as flinched. That is because Count Aaron knew first hand what might happen if any harm were to befall the professor. His homunculus could come running and cause a swath of destruction. In fact, one of the reasons for Nerick's hire was to keep Vee in check, and as it turns out, Vee is a check and balance for the Silver Bannermen. Within the steady and secure environment, the Count felt safe enough to stick his neck out and deploy his power which existed not in strength or knowledge, but money and status.

“For you see,” Vee calmly lectured, ignoring Count Aaron entirely, “Lizardmen are born to fight. It is in their blood, engraved in their very psyches. Swordplay, or any manner of weaponplay for that matter, is not something they need to learn. Their lives are merely refining what instincts they are born with. Building upon an innate set of skills. And a salamander is quite the intriguing case study of the known and unknown energies involved in monster physiology. Even if she were so young, it is not unthinkable she could muster the strength of an adult man, even if only for a brief moment using that flame of theirs.”

For the first time in a long time a smile spread across Vee's face. It was one of genuine wonder and joy over the celebration of knowledge and the pursuit of it. Nerick could not bear to look at it any longer, so he turned his gaze back to the Count. The nobleman's confidence had risen and was now starting to flaunt the actual power he did have: Money and status. He now recalled some choice words he had shared some time ago.

If you harm him, then you will pay the damages. And unless you also complete his job for me, you will reimburse me for his future pay.

Common sense was now starting to usher out the malaise of intoxication from his mind. Although he was still on the cusp of being enraged, the mercenary regained control.

“Then why did you let that monster in here at all?” Nerick spat.

“Quite ingenious actually,” Vee said. “Yaleria has since antiquity guarded the Brightwall separating this place, and the Empire, from a perpetual land of twilight ruled by the undead. Disaster would follow if those legions could pour forth onto Humanity. Even with the rise and incorporation within the Empire, it refused to pull any soldiers from those walls, all so such an event would never happen. That is why there is a plethora of legal avenues for the lords and ladies of the land to supply the Empire with its tithe of military service. By expending its wealth on foreign fighters, Yaleria can maintain its obligations, both present and in the distant past. It appears the Thorn Knight knew of such a technicality. Her affiliation to the Guilds of the Free Ports allows her to attend this event. She has just as much a right to be here as you do, Mr. Nerick.”

The mercenary breathed deeply. He almost exploded again just by hearing Vee's choice of words.

“Instead of coming to blows... I would rather suggest that you hire them, Mr. Aaron,” Vee said.

“Over my dead body!” Nerick screamed.

Vee ignored Nerick's protests and continued, “Our previous encounter was unfortunate, bound by professionalism and business. Besides, those two are not alone. Pre-emptively seeking to eliminate them without knowing their full strength potential would be foolish... But if the Thorn Knight and her companions are in need of currency in

exchange for their services... Then I think we would best we benefit from it. Otherwise we may encounter them as an obstacle instead."

"All the better!" Nerick declared.

"Perhaps you have heard of their movements in the North? Everywhere they go, disaster and upheaval are not far behind. And Mr. Nerick, how many weeks has it been now? Have you not yet made even the tiniest progress in your mission? Perhaps some competition would be in order? If not, maybe someone is more suited to-"

"Enough of this," Count Aaron declared. "Enough of this tonight. All of you, go back to your quarters. Professor Vee, continue your work, or your research. Whatever it is, just provide me the soldiers you promised... And Captain Nerick... Unless the Thorn Knight is ever in our way, you are to leave her alone. I wont stand for you, while you are under contract with me, to instigate anything that would complicate or undermine this operation. Her presence here is legal. I will not flagrantly violate the law of this land for your sake. That goes for all of you."

The Count waved his finger all about the room, but at Vee and Nerick in particular.

"Get out... Dismissed!""

The mercenary Captain stepped around the professor and the other soldiers followed closely behind him. One of Nerick's Lieutenants quickly set off, trying to catch up with the fuming man as the rest of his soldiers dispersed into their barracks. In the dining hall, Vee had once again completely ignored Count Aaron's demands.

"No doubt you are aware the roads outside Yaleria are in a sorry state. To move from the northern forests to the southern coasts would require a substantial investment. By taking great risk in attending your open invitation ball, they have exposed their desperation. No doubt the sustenance needed to feed a wyvern of such size and salamander would be-"

"Professor Vee, I told you to leave," Count Aaron said.

Vee sighed and looked up at the Count with his disappointed baggy light brown eyes.

"They could be bought for but a song. With someone clever enough to dissect byzantine Yalerian law included within the deal."

“One more reason not to become involved,” Count Aaron said, becoming more irritated.

“So be it. But I would so wish to study those... those flames. Possibly a mutation. At the very least some mastery of her flames to use them as she does... And that man... To have single-handedly destroyed a commander class... There is much from him I want to-”

“Vee. If you are half the man of knowledge you say you are, why not tell me something of value."

A slight smile warped Vee's straight lipped expression, "Only for a price, my dear Count. But I'm afraid you'll have to be quite specific. Your bluffs may tower toward the skies and their silver veins reach deep into the ground, but you have far from wealthy enough pay with silver and gold a mere fraction of the world's secrets I possess."

The count was not sure if the alchemist was lying or not. The man did not appear to be someone who was capable of lying. That expressionless look upon his face was not a guise, it was who the man was. Very little interested him. Only the unknown stood a chance to elicit so much as a grin out of the gangly man. There were times that the Count regretted consorting with the member of Ouroboros, but the wonders he had shown and promised were too much for the nobleman to turn down. But the man's patience had been worn thin tonight. He grew angrier with each passing moment now that the presence of the mercenary had left. The past humiliations of letting Nerick intimidate and walk all over him. The man was a necessary evil. He would need his services and those of his men to fulfill his plot to overthrow Duke Malco. What he needed at this moment, however, was solitude so that he might center himself.

"That's enough. Get back to work,” the Count said, mustering enough pleasantly to ask somewhat nicely.

Seeing his musing were not gathering interest, he eventually relented and skulked off and back into the shadows. That left the Count to stand there and let the whole night wash back over him. The man's knees went weak and he plopped back down onto a chair behind him.

Meanwhile, as Nerick stomped his way back to his quarters, one of his concerned lieutenants finally caught up with him. A novice bannerwoman who carried a curved wooden staff with her, scraps and pieces of armor and magic trinkets jingled as they clung to her flowing

robes. Her medium length curly black hair bobbing to and fro as she jogged to catch up with her captain.

“Captain. Wait,” She begged as the man's long footsteps far outpaced her walking pace.

“There's no time to wait,” Nerick growled. “We need to finish what we paid to do and be done. I refuse to let this chance slip by. The Almighty has given me this chance.”

"Captain Nerick, you do remember what the Grand Master ordered you to do?"

"Do not test my patience, Breena. I know full well why he sent me and what we are to get our hands on. We'll get it done with the same breath we comb this entire forsaken place for that cowardly cunt of a Count. Just make sure everyone knows to keep playing their roles as starry eyed and short sighted treasure hunters. If the Count knew of it instead, he wouldn't have hired the likes of us to find it. The keys we need to roam freely would be torn from our hands faster than you can blink."

Breena was not entirely convinced. She saw the odd tics had scattered the captain thoughts like smashed glass. His eyes were fixated on something far away while he spoke of their mission.

“You- You don't plan on fighting the Thorn Knight, do you?”

Nerick stopped and turned toward the woman. He studied the uneasy look on her face. Obviously, she had heard the rumors. Even after all this time, and ever since her disappearance, they had yet to vanish completely.

The concern on her face worsened the more she spoke, “And what about what the professor said? Does the Grand Master not teach we must never engage with monsters without insufficient reconnaissance? If it were only the Thorn Knight we might... But Vee said there was-”

“No need.” Nerick said, eerily calm now. “It's obvious now. I don't know why it only came to me sooner. We need not seek out the Thorn Knight. No. Not when there is now another path to take. To hurt her far worse than when she pushed that burning sword through my chest. We will hammer and break the weakest link. No. We will not hire them... I will not allow it. But so long as they are here in Yaleria, I hope someone else does.”

Chapter 85

I watched the pair of beady brown eyes as they darted back and forth behind a man-a-arms' barbute. A shadow cast over his face gave the illusion of stoicism, but I saw sweat glistening. He held a single crumpled piece of paper in his gauntlets and he stared at it as though it were an illusion. It was something the man thought would go away if he wished hard and waited long enough. That piece of paper crinkled and rustled, echoing in the tense silence as his hands shook.

Four times now. This guard has read what was written on that paper four times. The platemail laden man had walked in with a swagger only a minute ago, but it took much less for all that pride and courage to evaporate. This scene played out the exact same way fifteen minutes ago when we first arrived; only now my feet were starting to get sore from standing stock-still. I didn't dare budge on account of the ten other guards forming a circle, each with a hand and fidgeting fingers on the hilts of their sheathed blades.

“Is there a problem?” I asked impatiently.

The armored man looked up at me with a startled expression. It hadn't been my imagination; the guard was stuck in his own little world while studying those black ink runes. He slowly turned his back to me and handed it off to a woman who had hiding behind him. She had the look of a librarian about her. It had everything to do with those frumpy scholar's robes she was wearing. At least she was a non threatening person to help ease the tension; the legality of the document was way beyond any of these guards, but luckily their instincts told them get help in trying to deescalate it instead of resorting to threats and violence. Disaster would have been unavoidable if they just up and decided to turn us away. Things would have gotten violent if one of the other ten guards didn't have the common sense to fetch their captain AND someone with a shred of legal knowledge.

But after handing it back for the third time— my impatience was beginning to morph into anger. Perhaps he just wasn't able to read all the fancy, black and cursive runes etched onto that browning piece of paper. But this made the second time she merely readjusted the glasses sliding down her nose and shook her head.

“I told you it's real,” she said, refusing to lay her hands on the paper for a second time.

The guard protested, “You say that, but-”

The woman fished around inside her robes once again produced some small address book. Without laying a finger on its cover of pages it flipped through on its own though force of magic. The book glowed faintly after an incantation she muttered quietly under her breath and stopped on its own accord about three-quarters through. She then held it up for the man to see; the page was glowing a faint white as luminescent blue runes spelled something out on the page that looked identical to what was scribed on the document.

“The seal is a match for the one used by the Zelice Republic and the signature is a perfect match of Doge Aniqtonia's,” the book flipped to another page which glowed the same but with different runes, “And the second seal is a match for the Church's. The signature below that belongs to Cardinal Joclyn.”

She closed the book closed with a loud slap and pointed her finger at the insignia at the very bottom.

“Below that is a clause recognizing the bearer as an official member of the Free Port Guild alliance. I've never heard of this 'Pond Leaf Banking', but it is part of Free Port's Guild conglomerate.”

“You say that, but—” The guard mumbled in disbelief.

“I... I don't think there's anything we can do,” The scholar said.

This time the guard's eyes didn't swing back in my direction. His gaze fell upon the one standing next to me.

“We just can't allow-”

“Huh~?” a thuggish voice grunted beside me.

It was a tone of voice which shamelessly subverted the expectations for how regal its owner appeared. I could hardly process the image myself. With both of her arms wrapped around my own, Rose was not dressed in her usual armour and adventuring gear. We had shed her of that and now she was clad in a long, ruffled and flowing dark green ball gown. Any elegance it was supposed to give its wearer, however, was no match for Rose's crass personality. Her thin red brows furrowed and those black reptilian pupils narrowed on their target. A crack of bone as she clenched her claws, the razor sharp talons and the gleam of her scaled and boney knuckles caused the guard to flinch.

“You trying to tell me that the law doesn't apply here?” She said threateningly.

That caused everyone to clench and tense up. Rose's tail which swayed behind her through an opening in the dress' backside doubled in brightness as the flames cresting it sparked in sync with her souring mood.

“Or maybe ya believe I'm not who that paper says I am?”

No, they most certainly did. I could hear them mutter it under their breath every so often: Rosette, The Thorn Knight. The image that name put in their minds of others became more vivid the further south we travelled. Rose's name was one of many ghost stories shared by veterans who had spent time on the battlefield in the past few years, or at least listened to those who did.

But if I didn't do something Rose might just demonstrate to these guards which parts were exaggerated and which ones were not.

“This was all organized by Count Aaron as an open invitational, was it not?” I asked.

“That's right,” The captain replied.

“And so Rose and I are here as representatives of the Free Port Guild. I believe that gives us the right to pass.”

The captain tried once more to object, “It was never the intention to allow-”

“That's a mercenary license signed off by a Doge and a Cardinal. Unless you're trying to tell me you have special laws against that sort of thing... Oh wait, it's the opposite if I recall. I'm sure people would love to hear how Count Aaron is in contempt of-”

The eyes of the scholar and the captain both shot open wide at the same time.

“No!” They screamed in sync.

After clearing their throats, they lowered their voices... At least to the best of their ability.

The scholar was the first to speak out, “By all means, we apologize. This is just a... Extraordinary case.”

“Yes, forgive us for any insult, we just had to make absolutely sure,” The captain said in a fluster.

The helmeted man handed the paper back which I slipped into the inside pocket of my long coat. He then turned his back to us once more and waved his hand as the signal for the other guards to clear the way. From the hissing sounds coming through his teeth I could tell he wasn't too pleased. Maybe he feared he was in for a reprimand for letting us through, but there was nothing he could legally do to stop us. And just a moment later, the large wooden doors creaked open. Inside were the external gardens of the Count's manor. The sun had already set so the flowers were not in their full splendor, but the tint of early twilight still gave us a shadow of its majesty.

As we walked through the empty garden, the moment of serenity was disturbed only by the murmurs of the guards behind us and the lamp light shining out from the ajar windows of the manor in front of us. I could just hear the hub-bub of the other party goers inside mixed with the occasional lone instrument tuning and practicing for the main event. For now, there wasn't another soul in the whole garden. It was just Rose and I, with her arms wrapped around mine which made it difficult to walk properly.

Rose complained earlier that it was hard to walk with that poofy dark green dress around her waist. She wasn't used to this kind of restricted movement and so that dress dragging gently along the ground was a tripping hazard to a girl like her.

“Rose, we're already late. We need to hurry,” I said.

“Whoa there, no. Go slower,” She protested.

She had a blush on her face that was rather unbecoming of her, and I had to admit it was rather cute. If I said that out loud she'd probably punch me for it though. I just had that feeling. It was more of a survival instinct though. Teasing her about it was certainly off limits.

“Well, you were the one who was so adamant about going to this ball,” I said, trying to take my mind elsewhere.

“Susan got to go last time, so it's my turn,” Rose pouted.

“Then stop making a fuss about the dress. It's just one night and business casual is not allowed. We had to dump the rest of everything we had for that this suit,” I said, pointing to the monkey-like

suit I was in.

“Yeah yeah,” Rose groaned.

“Not to mention how many hours she and Minte spent sewing yours from scratch and tailoring it to fit.”

“Yeah~” She sighed.

“Or how much flight time Chris tallied up going from place to place to get those two what they needed. And don't mind how long and hard Ba'el laughed at you afterwards either-”

“Yeah yeah!” She shouted.

Rose knew what was at stake and what we had risked for this evening. There was still, however, a kernel of rebelliousness in her. She was probably just grumpy on account of being hungry. We had to cut back on rations to make it this far without hiking on empty stomachs so close to Yaleria. I could see it through the slight lack of color in her face. Every so often she pulled at the hem of the dress with those claws of hers and I could see the agitation as well. If it were not for the carrot on the stick in front of her, she'd probably tear that dress to pieces in a heartbeat. She must be feeling the same self-conscious thoughts I was.

So we walked in awkward silence. Neither of us knew what the appropriate thing to say was. As we walked down a stairway into the artificial valley the manor garden grew in, I went a step further to offer a hand so that Rose would not trip over all that fabric while walking down. I did it on an impulse, and although it was probably akin to pulling out of her talons, Rose accepted with an even darker shade of red across her cheeks.

At the bottom of the stairs a quaint little labyrinth of chest high hedgerows divided the flower beds into segments. There wasn't much light besides the budding twilight and the lamps of the manor, but Rose's tail lit the way well enough. The worst of it was that this awkward walk to the manor was being prolonged as it ruthlessly bore down on both of us. It was when I started sweating that I knew for sure Rose was getting cold feet. Her excess body heat seeped into me, but it wasn't controlled and my body wasn't soaking and adapting to it like normal.

“At least you don't have to worry about stilettos too,” I joked.

No pair of high heeled shoe could fit over those bulky armored talons of hers. Just imagining Rose trying to walk with a pair on seemed like an exercise in unbridled cruelty.

“Of course I do, Laven,” Rose replied in a chipper tone.

I stared ahead for a moment before dragging my bewildered eye over Rose's beaming and jagged smile. She freed one of her arms and with nothing more than a shake, a dagger slid out from her sleeve and into her waiting claw. My feet glued to the ground in shock.

“Rose—” I sighed. “That's not what I was talking about... And why do you have that! Didn't we agree to leave any weapons back at the camp!”

The salamander tumbled the long and thin knife like a pen while staring back at me with a confident expression.

“They tell ya leave your weapons at the door, but that's how they get ya. So when they try to arrest ya, and when they don't expect it, you give em a quick stab when they step too close. Then you take theirs and you're ready for action when his buddies figure out what just happened. A couple seconds faster than pounding the guy's face in, and that matters in a pickle like that.”

Rose thrust the stiletto in a few practice thrusts that were lightning fast... and no doubt very precise to the dead center of some shadow target's chest.

“Put that away,” I demanded, “We're not looking to start trouble.”

“But I'll be ready if there is any, so don't you worry!” Rose said

She had a million watt smile as the dagger twirled once more in the palm of her claw; the stiletto slid back down her sleeve as readily as it came out. Somehow. I can't figure out how she did it exactly. It seems that while the clothes could make the person, it could never remake them.

Pretending to stab some poor sod to death brought her back for a moment, but reality set back in when we tried to continue on our way to the manner. The ruffling of the dress nearly caused her to trip and I had to catch her by the arm and put her back upright once again.

The 'Thorn Knight' was definitely out of her element. Even her hair had been tied up in a bun instead of allowing her that signature ponytail which flowed and whipped around freely. The other girls had tried in vain to comb down the spikiness of her hair, but ultimately gave up. That one cowlick of hers was in particular very stubborn and proved an impossible task to tame. It took all five of us four hours just to catch her, pin her down and get her into that dress without tearing it. She was so excited until the moment we brought out what she'd have to wear. The one thing we couldn't do was stop her from wearing that tattered black ribbon tied around her hair bun. No matter how much it clashed with the dress, and the overall image everyone worked so hard to pull off, she adamantly refused to be parted with it. Not even for an evening.

I had half the mind to ask about it for once, but the longer I looked at her, the more flustered I became. Seeing her dressed up and not prancing about half dressed and without that armour of hers was throwing me for a loop. I kept stealing glances at how that dress tightly clung to her chest. Her bosom was hardly being contained and the cleavage I could peer down with ease was something I wasn't prepared for. We exchanged glances like cat and mouse, embarrassingly looking away when we noticed one of us was starting at the other.

The hedgerows in the end didn't slow us down much at all and so we quickly arrived at the stairs leading up toward the manor. I offered my hand to Rose once again who took it quicker than she did before and we finally arrived before the Count's manor where the sound of hundreds bustled behind the stone walls. A couple servants stood guard at the doors and I breathed out in relief that we wouldn't run into another Mexican standoff.

They were not as surprised to see us as I feared, but the visible gulping of their Adam’s apples told volumes about how worried they were.

“W-w-welcome sir and madam,” one of them said with a stutter.

A creak of old wood reverberated through the stone ground, to my feet, and the way into the manor opened. There was a small foyer beyond and at the end of a short hallway was where the party seemed to be. Inside the manor was like a whole other world completely. The castle back north in Zern paled in comparison to the opulence here. It was more than just a cultural shift, Domdracveria must truly be some

sort of backwater. A castle stuck in times past, or merely not rich enough to catch up with a couple centuries worth of architecture and fashion.

My breathing quickened as the noise from the ball grew louder and louder. The smell of perfume, and all its noxious artificial chemicals, assailed my nose. It was like a slap in the face after the subtle dew and gentle smell of the garden outside. Both had been created, but a looming feeling of artificiality settled down around me. It reminded me that were we quickly approaching a world of diplomacy, rumors, convenient falsehoods, silver tongues and ulterior motives.

I wasn't sure how well this would go over, but it was too late to back out now. This was the biggest meeting of who's who that we'd ever have the chance to attend. Nobles, dignitaries, other mercenary companies, merchant hot shots and other assorted VIPs would gather here from all the nearby nations and it was our only chance to seek out some kind of sponsorship so we could get the funds we'd need to cut a path through the center and southern empire that blocked our path the to Free Ports.

I wasn't alone; Rose felt just as nervous, perhaps more. At least that's what I could tell from her body heat. I reached down and found one of her claws and locked my fingers between hers. The smooth scales of her palms were searingly hot, but I managed. Her temperature actually reigned back in when she squeezed my hand in return. I had to grit my teeth at first when I thought my bones would crack under her strength, but I bore with it.

Rose and I passed through the final threshold and beyond the point of no return. Beyond that event horizon lay a completely different world. Well over a hundred individuals were all crammed into one single huge ballroom. Huge crystal chandeliers loomed high above the dance floor, winding stairs led to a second level with a balcony spanning the entire second story. Large ornate glass windows covered three adjacent and opposite walls. Ivory white marble and gold foil dominated my vision as the lamp light brightened the room in defiance of the twilight seeping in from outside.

Gathered on the floor and lounging on the balcony above were men and women of all descriptions. Foppish nobles and grizzled knights. Husky men with battle hardened features. Fat, round merchants in their extravagant and expensive clothing. There were fair ladies along with rich and round matrons. Their dresses ranged from the simple to umbrella like skirts supported no doubt by a lattice work

of iron wires. The party had yet to officially begin, but there was already jovial mingling everywhere as there was a wine glass between the fingers of nearly every hand. Business talk mixed in with the personal until it all became one giant mess of noise that made extracting a single conversation from impossible unless one were right next whom you spoke with.

What surprised me most of all were the few that stood out, and not because of how they were dressed. I spotted some short and stocky characters with great big beards. There were also tall and fair people with great big and long ears. I even say the lithe and graceful womenfolk with such ears and they were certainly not human. Mixed in with the others were elves and dwarfs, something I had not expected to see. I believe I had heard of them seldom before, but these were the demi-humans I had heard of. And this time they weren't trying to shoot arrows at me. Some nations of near human people seemed to have survived up until this point.

But any thought that would make the presence of Rose and I any less obtuse would be misguided. It was hard to miss the woman with the bright red scales, armoured reptilian hide and fiery tail. While it did not bring the whole room to a standstill, a few heads turned out way immediately and stared long and hard before breaking away. The tone of their conversations changed dramatically while eyes from all directions kept stealing glances whenever they were able. We braved the attention and approached the crowd. Rose's tail gave us more room than others enjoyed.

I recalled something Rose had told me while she gushed about her old war stories: Lizardmen had been rather common mercenaries for the past couple of decades. If that were true, then our presence would indeed be a novelty and not a disaster or outright heresy. However, that didn't stop us from being the only monstrous couple in the entire ballroom. And Rose wasn't a common variant of lizardmen. So while the looks we were getting were not of those seeing something completely new or forbidden, the blazing tail drew many eyes, each with their own morbid curiosity.

But if that were true, why do I not see any other monsters around?

“So far, not so bad,” I muttered half-heartedly.

I took a glance up at the balcony above where I saw a lot of people looking down at the two of us. Out of all those looking, it

appeared the ladies were staring the most. The merchants gave us a quick glance, but paid no mind after a single glance. Those who appeared to be warriors purposefully tried to ignore us while the debutantes and young blue blooded men were the only ones truly gawking despite their best efforts to keep their pristine and manufactured manners in check.

Then something broke the stale and fake smell of ladies' perfume, the buffet tables of hors d'oeuvres... Oh no... I looked over to Rose who had up until now a pensive face which had replaced with bright round eyes and slightly agape mouth.

“Rose?” I said while shaking her slightly.

No response.

“Rose, please focus,” I begged.

“Rose isn't here right now,” she replied after a few seconds.

I tried to keep an arm wrapped around her, but there was nothing I could do to suppress the girl's hunger. Rose slipped free of me in an instant and quickly slid up to the nearest table. The crowd of people split like the Red Sea, and they were wise to do so. The salamander quickly picked up a mini-sandwich and ate it whole. I don't think she even had a chance to chew it properly. She turned around and smiled back at me with eyes closed in delight. There even appeared to be what looked tears almost ready to pour forth from her eyes. And so the plates were now quickly being cleared off one by one. What any proper lady would eat delicately and daintily over the course of several minutes were being treated like chicken nuggets by this girl.

A profound sense of second-hand embarrassment seized me when the people around the table slowly inched away. There were faces of bewilderment, amazement and disgust and some of them looked over at me before their offense accumulated to such a degree that they decided to ignore us entirely. Well, we weren't seen as a threat, but we had certainly crashed this little corner of the party with boorish behavior. I really should not have underestimated this girl's appetite. It wasn't going to end any time soon either, because the serving staff had spotted the hurricane and scurried off toward the kitchen. They'd need all hands on deck for this one.

On the bright side, that ought to improve Rose's mood and get her back to normal. I doubt she'd be of any help until she was working

on a full stomach. But for now, I had to deal with the fallout. Not even a minute had passed and we've already reached pariah status. I'd have to rely on someone throwing me a bone in order to make any headway... I'd otherwise have to do it fighting upstream from all the cold shoulders and glares bearing down on us.

Throughout the whole crowd, I did spot one pair of eyes still looking in my direction. A tall and fair skinned man with elven ears and long platinum blonde hair running down his back with locks over his shoulders. I always attributed frailty and grace with the mental image of an elf, but his shoulders were squared and he stood there with a commanding aura. He wore long flowing robes opened in the front, but revealing nothing so gaudy as the other nobles. It all appeared to be made from natural materials, so typical of what you'd expect from woodland elves. But much like myself, he appeared to be alone and ignored by all the other guests bustling about the ballroom floor.

What shook me most of all, was that he was a man. Did demi-humans not fall under the influence of the Demon Lord? I recalled that elf in the service to the inquisition along with those other monsters. Were their circumstances any different? Perhaps I would have those questions answered, because the man gave a cordial smile and walked though the crowd toward me.

“Good evening,” his voice chimed.

It was deeper than I thought it would be given the fair elven features. I expected a kind of boy band tone of voice out of him, but it sounded normal and masculine enough.

“Good evening,” I replied, tenseness thick in my voice.

His light purple coloured eyes looked over my shoulder and over Rose's back as she gorged at the buffet table. There was no smirk or change in his expression and then he turned his attention back to me.

“A salamander is an uncommon sight these days. They were few and far between during the early Ill years, but those few that had fallen and those few that returned to their hidden homes with war spoils in tow have made them scarce these past few years.”

The Ill years. I assumed the man was talking about the when the Emperor had severely fallen ill. Rose had a lot of stories about these times. If you listened to enough and pieced them altogether you got a whole other story out of them. It's all something before my time,

but I suppose even as an outsider I'm not as immune and distant to it as I would like. Without this Emperor's authority, many of his vassals, and all the nations that made up the Empire, began to bicker and settle their blood feuds with clandestine wars.

Some resorted to hiring mercenaries, even monsters, to fight their petty wars and suppressing of rebellions as quickly as possible. Anything to achieve victory before the now slow and impotent arm of the imperial court swung and suppressed the violence. That must be what this elf, this man was referring to. Now I had to wonder whether he was in the same line of work as Rose.

“My apologies. My name is Orchalen, third son,” the elf said while taking a slight bow with a hand across his chest.

“Laven,” I replied, unsure if I should offer my hand to shake while he bowed.

“The Wasteland King? I see that I did not hazard my guess poorly.”

That caught me off guard. I don't recall having heard that since Domdracveria.

“I wouldn't go that-”

“The man who mysteriously appeared from the barren Northern forests, from and wastes with monsters in his retinue.”

I was going to object, but I couldn't find the words, so the man continued.

“That would make the fine lady over there the Thorn Knight, correct?”

“That's right,” I said.

There wasn't any reason to deny it. After all, Rose and I were here right now because her paperwork was on a whole other level.

“Then that would also make you the Rider of Zern? But I wonder this: Under which do you join us here tonight?”

Great, how delightfully cryptic. I did not like that this elf knew a lot more about me than I knew about him.

“Guild business,” I replied. “I don't have any official ties to

Domdracveria."

"I am sure that will put at ease the hearts of those here tonight. Domdracveria and the North is a matter few speak candidly about these days," Orchalen said with a sigh of relief. "If you make that known, I am sure these barriers will slowly crumble over the evening."

"I have no clue what you're walking about," I said.

Being frank and honest was about the only thing that would reign this man back in right about now. I was worried more about clearing up this little misunderstanding than I was offending him. While my face was no doubt cross, it was he who was now wearing the confused expression. He looked at me as though I were the ones with the answers to the roundabout questions he was asking.

"Perhaps I have spoken out of line?" Orchalen mused. "Very well, I shall be more forward. We have spoken for but a minute, but I can already tell that you underestimate yourself, Laven. I suspect most people here merely see you and Ms. Rosette as a consequence of the times; monsters hired to fill ranks. Considered vile, debased, but useful. I suspect their attitudes shall change should they know it was you who helped orchestrate Princess Violetta's securing of the Domdracveria throne."

Just as the elf said that, a few of the other guests surrounding us stole glances and eavesdropped on those few keywords. That would be a rumor which would spread like a spark through a dry underbrush. I looked over my shoulders and watched the wave of tone changing spread. A new series of topics spread and new curious gazes looked in our direction. Meanwhile Rose had progressed to yet another dish, oblivious to it all. I looked back at Orchalen who kept a straight face despite the profound impact his words had cause in this tiny corner of the greater ballroom.

"I did no such thing," I said. "What are you after?"

"A good instinct at a time like this," he said. "But I merely serve. That is my duty and you appeared to be in distress. I do not discriminate."

"When you put it like that that, you're telling me you're not on the receiving end very often."

The elf actually chuckled.

“Tis merely a reality for elvenkin... We demi-humans, as your kind so blithely call us.”

“From unfamiliarity, or am I missing something else?”

“A man from the North would likely not understand. But elvenkin, and the dwarven sons and daughters suffered just as mankind did so many years ago.”

“These Demon Wars I hear so much about,” I said.

“Correct. Many speak of them in past tense, perhaps rightfully so. Their carnage has not, and likely will not, ever be seen again... Just as the cities and nations of men crumbled under the onslaught of the last great demon war a thousand years ago, so too were 'demi-human' forests and mountain holds besieged. To this day, I have only heard children's stories of halflings and gnomes from my grandmother's lap. And although I take no offense, you looked upon me as though I were just as equally a mystery.”

“I met an elf about once or twice. We didn't talk much and she tried to kill me,” I said matter of factually.

“Did you stray near sacred woods?”

“The inquisition,” I murmured, to not disturb those nearby.

Orchalen's eyes went hard, but his expression soon softened and frowned. He let out a deep sigh and plucked a wine glass from the platter of a servant boy as he glided by. He took one long sip before he could muster the strength to respond.

“A fallen sister, no doubt.”

I had no idea what the hell that was supposed to be, but I let him take another drink. The hard look in his eyes told me he would need it.

“I hope there is room for forgiveness in your heart, Laven. You've listened so far, so I'll trust you do. I shall indulge you... The new Demon Lord's curse is as far reaching as it is insidious.”

That goes without saying, I thought to myself.

“Man and elf are not as different as they would like to admit... It pains even me to admit it. The plieshshidal, pariahs of both

elven and mankind. Although a man and elf may fall in love, and bear child, the lives of men are short. Were short," The elf said, looking up at me with his chin tilted down. "Time together would be short, the pain of loss lingering and festering. And the plieshshidal, the half breeds, carried with them blood that risked being too thick to magic."

Magic. If it were one of things that made this place so unique from home I'd have to say it was the presence of this extra-dimensional energy. Something unexplainable, and poorly understood, which could bend reality at the whims of those possessing the will capable of controlling it.

"So, this is bloodline thing?"

"Correct. A bastard child of man and elf may end up deaf to whispers of the forest and the voices of their ancestors. If he or she is not, then perhaps any or all children born down that family line till the end of time. Such a thing is of great shame to elven kind. A risk of losing, what you would see in yourself, their humanity."

"There's a price on that too. After what I've seen," I said.

If there wasn't, then where did those Sabbaths come from?

"The charms of the short lived, who live life so fully and wildly, can tempt even the patient courtship of elves. I spent five decades courting my own wife. I suspect such a thing is bewildering to a more mortal man such as yourself. Some may find the impatience and daring of humans as charming. We care for and love flowers even though they wilt, do we not? As for humans... They typically do not tolerate things unlike themselves. They are not so bad as dwarves in that respect, but they seldom live long enough, or live a life full enough, to overcome the fear of others. Even I still find the thoughts of humans to be quite strange, even though we are so similar in appearance. To humans, elven kind has always possessed a kind of ethereal beauty. It was rather uncommon in ages past, unlike today."

"Wait. You said human lives were short. What do you mean by that? If that's true, then shouldn't-"

"Because the Demon's Lord curse turns human women into demons, so too it can transform elven women." He said, interrupting me. "The outward expression of demonic features is rare, but the heart is still the same. Elven pride is bred in elven blood. It screams in protest when tainted, but the curse is strong and always grows stronger once it has taken hold. Lust always drags them toward human

men. Soon that pride wilts away and is replaced with passion. However, ironically enough, only pure elven girls are ever sired from such unions. That confounds every scholar I have spoke with. Such a thing should be an impossibility. But human men tainted that way live well beyond their years. The old cautionary tales of tragic love don't hold the same merit anymore."

"And only girls?" I asked.

"Yes. But even now, midwives claim the birth of elven boys to be one in ten for those not tainted. Not just two centuries ago it was still three in ten. Before that time, it was always five in ten as it was since the dawn of time. It is another phenomenon we cannot explain, nor have we found a remedy. I have heard tales from the bearded ones that they share a similar dilemma."

Orchalen stared dead straight into my eyes with a resigned look in his eyes. There was an absence of hope, but there wasn't a crushing sense of despair in them.

"Our fathers from ages gone by may at long last be facing their end before long."

"Ever since that time?"

So long as I had him talking I was hungry for anything I could get out of him.

"When I was just a boy, Laven. A good three centuries before you were even born. It is a story that haunts not just me, but all my brothers and sisters in the Black Woods."

Now his eyes drifted off me and stared a thousand yards past me, past the party, deep into the distant past.

"The warning we all failed to heed," Orchalen said, swallowing a lump in his throat before he could continue. "I was but a boy exploring the woods as any child would do during their coming of age. Just a small cadre of friends and I. We followed the tracks of a dire wolf: Lupine beasts endowed with magic, it causes them to grow as large as stags. It was alone, with heavy paw tracks in the winter snow. Its pelt would give us a great deal of prestige amongst our peers. When we found it, it had laid down, hidden itself under some brush. A mother with pups borne the night before. But the dead of winter was not a time when wolves bred. And there was something else we saw that was extraordinary. Out of all the pups, one was

different. It looked like a child, with fleshy skin, but paws, tail and ears. It cried and suckled from its mother's teat just as her wolven brothers and sisters did. We dared not anger the forest by taking life where new life had just come into the world. We were so shocked by what we saw that we fled... No one believed our story."

The elf had finished his glass and deftly placed it on another fast moving platter behind him without even looking.

"The years passed. I was still but a boy, but one night I saw another child alone in the darkness. A test of courage for elven youth was to brave the dangerous night time woods. But In that darkness, I alone spotted a girl, with grey tail, paws and ears. She howled sorrowfully at the moon. Once more I fled, and no one believed me. When I finally became a young man, I finally began to hear more stories of these strange wolf women. Small packs of them roving the Black Forest we called our home. Eventually, as the decades passed, the dire wolves of old vanished. Only these strange and elusive women remained. There were even tales being spun that they had spoken, but these individuals were not believed. We were too stubborn to accept what was happening. There was panic when some girls and women went missing from the villages, but we felt paralyzed. Confused. We kept this secret to ourselves. We were not shaken from our complacency until it was too late."

"These dire wolves attacked?" I asked.

"Yes, but not we. Such a punishment would have been suitable for our arrogance; however, it was the city of men they turned on. For you see, after the last Demon War elvenkind were ravaged just as much as humans. Humans live short lives, but breed quickly. Their need for space caused them to expand old logging villages into towns and cities. Moss Creek. Home to two hundred thousand human souls, build well within the Black Woods that we elves had called home for millennia. They were sacred woods, but we had not the numbers nor the power to protest... That city became the first 'demon realm' we knew of. Hundreds of wolf women descended upon that place. It was then we learned that those dire wolves had become Lycanthropes. The result was predictable. Those who could not flee were captured. Many thousands more were turned. The similar event happened all across the continent and the world over. Our distrust of t he humans, our resentment of them, our ignorance, cowardice and arrogance led to that disaster. The Empire never forgave us. Not even until this day. They eye us elvenkind with suspicion. Given the fallen maidens, their suspicion has only grown worse."

Orchalen's heavy words shook my own heart. I could hear it in his voice that there was a whole world's weight bearing down on his shoulders.

“This is not at tale you will hear from humans. This is the truth which has been buried.”

“So why bother telling me all this? I asked.

“I am dreadfully bored with nothing to do,” He said flatly. “But do take it as a sincere warning. These are the powers you meddle with. These are the feelings of fear and hate that hang above you like a sword dangling by but a frayed string... I don't believe you've understood that yet.”

“Just spit it out,” I said, becoming agitated by his tone of voice.

“You're walking a fine line between this world, and the one which is helping itself freely to our host’s pantry,” the elf said, gesturing toward Rose behind me.

“That glutton has saved my life more than once.”

“So it is loyalty and obligation defines you, Laven? Or perhaps—?”

He stopped mid thought. I glared at him and he glared back at me. His situation was no doubt complicated, but certainly he didn't see me as a potential friend outright. He was hiding under a mountain of suspicion hidden behind a polite smile. I thought our conversation may have ended abruptly and on the wrong foot, but the gloom that descended was suddenly swept away.

“Mmmphm, Laven!” Rose voice rang out behind me, her cheeks puffed out with all the food she had yet to swallow. “U shud get sum 'ile—”

After gorging herself enough, or at least enough for round one, Rose returned and stood beside me. That's when she laid her eyes on Orchalen and I saw them open wide. She quickly swallowed what food she had stored in her cheeks and rudely pointed a claw at the elf.

“The Gale!” she yelled in surprise.

Orchalen's sorrowful face was replaced with bemusement and a touch of surprise.

“Who?” I asked.

“Orchalen, The Gale of the Black Woods,” Rose replied, excitement dripping from her voice. “Prince Orchalen, General of the Hize Murhrar.”

His mu rawr? I don't think I could even pronounce that right if I tried, how the hell did her clumsy tongue manage that? I looked back at Orchalen who gave Rose the same cordial bow he gave to me.

“I suppose an apology is in order, Laven. I was not completely forthwith with you. I indulged myself in your cordial and casual conventionalism. It was a refreshing experience.” He took a breath then continued, “I am indeed Orchalen, third born prince of the Mure Taune elves.”

“And this 'Gale' part?” I asked while looking back and forth between he and Rose.

“For his signature lightning-fast tactics and use of the Black Wood terrain,” Rose said. “Orchalen's pretty much THE reason why the Mure Taune are still around.”

Rose was looking pretty starstruck. But I shouldn't be too surprised. If she had to have one area of expertise, this was it.

“I have had quite some time to hone my craft, Thorn Knight,” the elf said humbly. “But your exploits have reached so far as the inner sanctums of the Black Woods. I would never wish upon myself the circumstances you have fought your way out of. But I also had to meet the Rider of Zern. The man who single-handedly broke through Prince Deron's blockade. The man who fought the Boar Prince in single combat with nary a weapon at his side. He who put his life on the line to protect the Dragon Princess.”

“And the inquisition, and North Rangers, and rogue heroes, and a giant, and deadly assassins,” Rose gushed with pride while counting them off on her talons.

“I-I wouldn't say I-” I flustered.

I didn't do much other than struggle to not die against any of those things. To claim those were a long list of accomplishments I had

overcome was a bit much... Wait. If this man was a general then-

“But what are you doing here, Orchalen?” Rose asked.

She beat me to it.

“I suppose you could say I am something of a hostage,” he replied calmly.

Rose and I stood there for a moment to process that.

“WHAT?” We both raised our voice at the same time.

“I told you in passing, did I not?” He said sprightly. “Recent events have caused the Church and Empire to be very wary. Even now, Typhon wanders the Black Forests freely and I am powerless to stop them. Our reluctance to ally ourselves and assist the Empire whenever and however they demand has agitated them immensely. But should we attack Typhon, I would not expect the Empire to rush to our assistance when the inevitable counter-attack begins. The ultimatum from Typhon is that we do not interfere... And that is why I am here: Offering my neck in exchange for neutrality. For as long as it is possible to do so. My being here is but symbolic gesture that my people are not sympathetic to, nor intend on allying with those rebels and terrorists.”

I spoke up with a faint hope, “So you're in trouble and would need-”

“My apologies, Laven. I command my father's forces. I do not levy them.”

So he did know what I was after before I said it.

“If your travels do take you to the Black Woods, then I and no doubt my father as well, would be humbled to make you and your companions our guests. For now, all I can do is provide you this warning.”

Orchalen leaned closer toward Rose and I. He spoke quietly, but his words were the heaviest yet.

“Leave this place.”

Orchalen had nothing else to say, so he stepped back and gave one more polite bow. He did not even stop to turn back around

when I raised my hand to call him back.

“I thought he'd be less rude in person,” Rose said, crestfallen.

“Typical elf?”

“Oh yeah,” Rose nodded.

On the bright side, so long as you ignored his rude departure, our meeting seemed to have softened the mood around here. Rather than being subject to frightened, suspicious or hostiles glances, the surrounding eyes appeared more curious. Maybe it also had something to do with Rose not having swung a fist or started a fight. At least not yet... Just the thought was almost enough to give me shivers and make me queasy.

Except that wasn't what happened. A much more dreadful and slimy feeling overtook me. A prickling on the back of my neck caused every nerve along my spine to squirm. My heart jumped up into my throat and a cold sweat oozed from my pores. I know this reaction very well by now. It's a primal one. My body writhing in fear while my waking mind foolishly concerns itself with higher functions. But I had to know what it was, so curiosity forced me to look up, far up to centre my sights on my peripheral vision.

Standing on the second balcony high above me was a man. My eyes locked right onto him before I knew who or what I was supposed to be looking for. He was a tall and gangly man. A white lab coat hung from his skeletal thin frame no different from a coat rack. His gangly fingers were wrapped on the railing and it accentuated the slight hunch on his back. He stood out from the finely dressed beside him and his bald head gleamed in the lamp light. He stared right down at me, only at me. A disgusting grin was plastered on his face.

My breathing seized up immediately. I felt as though there was something crushing my rib cage. Everything surrounding the man seemed to fade away, and only he, and the image of a giant made of iron remained. An ethereal pair of red glowing eyes peered out from a visor. My heartbeat quickened even more.

“Vee,” I whispered hoarsely.

I could only faintly hear Rose calling out right beside me.

“Laven? What's wrong?”

I looked at her quickly and then back upward again. I hoped that maybe the man would be gone like he was only some mirage, but there he was again. Still staring at me with that grin of his. The crushing feeling on my rib cage didn't go away either, the smell of oxide overpowered the stink of all the perfume too and the vivid memory of that iron monstrosity hit me like another lump of iron: A runaway truck.

If that man was here... Then...

I looked back to Rose. Concern. That would be the word I'd describe how her face was looking right now. She was about to look up too, but I put my hand on her shoulder in order to stop her.

“Rose,” I whispered, “guard the door.”

“What?”

She was right to ask questions. But I didn't have the time to answer them here. I slipped my hand into one of my coat pockets to make sure a small golden Ankh was still there. To my relief, it was.

“I need to call in and tell them we're inside,” I said.

“Call in what?”

I wanted to tell her, but I wasn't a hundred percent sure she wouldn't try to do something about it. Now wasn't the time. I didn't bother explaining myself. The Count would make his appearance and address soon, I needed to go out and get this done before then. I turned and walked toward the windows which led out to the outside veranda on the first floor. The cool night time air didn't cool of my sweltering nerves at all.

Chapter 86

A breeze from the cold night air chilled me to my core; it was like a bucket of ice water dumped over me. There was a ringing that lingered in my ears, but the clear air soothed my shot nerves. Without the background noise of a hundred conversations all at once in all directions I could now just barely hear myself think. But I wasn't thrilled about the destinations my train of thought wanted to drop me off at. Circumstances, however, were not going to tolerate me loitering at the station. Not with this train whistle screeching inside my ear.

Everything had been fine until I spotted those beady eyes draped in a white lab coat staring down at me. It brought about a phantom pain in my chest, the feeling of being caught in a vice. Claustrophobia and the feeling of cracking ribs caught me short of breath. That sea of people jostling about inside started to smother me and I felt as though I was drowning. A cascade of confusing and conflicting emotions led me into panic. This manor was safer than nearly anywhere else I could think of right now, but my instincts, carried on a gut feeling, cried in protest against my better judgement.

Vee was a dangerous man: what happened back in Domdracveria was proof enough of that. But he shouldn't be able to lift a finger at a time like this. But why would he? Why would he even bother? The man looked right at me. He had a disgusting grin on his face when he stared right at me. What was he thinking? What did he want? I had only meet him once before, but one of his creations nearly crushed the life out of me shortly after. The tingling sensation of that things heart in my hand which attacked my arm flared up again; probably a natural progression of the cold evening breeze...

I hoped.

Turning back around, I saw Rose had taken her place at the door to the balcony. People were still keeping clear, so I'd at the very least would not have to worry about anyone sneaking up from behind. She turned her head around and gave me a cheesy smile and a thumbs up. It was embarrassingly out-of-place, but even then, no one at the party paid any attention. We were the elephant in the room that everyone was desperate to ignore. It'd keep us out of trouble, but it was also going to make it hard to strike up a conversation and land us a contract. I gave Rose a weak smile and a wave in return and with that she beamed brightly once more before turning around and resuming her watch.

Meanwhile, I fished out that small golden ankh from my pocket and turned it over and over on the palm of my hand. I held it up to my eye and peered through it at the twilight landscape. Below the manor were acres of vineyard. Countless flowering vines predicted a generous bunker crop come fall. The smells of dew and vineyard hit my nose at last and the greenery in the moon and starlight captivated me, calmed me. My heart rate settled back down, so now was the time to remember how this thing was supposed to work.

I think I was supposed to swipe my thumb across the spine of the ankh from the bottom of the loop to the base of the staff, but I couldn't remember if it mattered what side...

With the right touch, the gold trinket glowed faintly and a dog whistle ring brought the device to life. The suddenness in which it came to life caused me to flinch and crane my neck back while I held it as far away in front of me as I could. The contraption gave me the impress that it just wasn't as stable as it looked. This thing filled me now with a whole other sense of unease. But it was a necessary tool, like nitroglycerine.

It pulsed once, twice, and on the third time it stabilized. Now there was a hum instead, a rhythmic pulse, a predictable harmonic sine wave. A high pitch voice was carried through the ether from the open loop of the ankh. An aggravating shrill static from the trinket lanced my eardrums, but there was a clear voice. It sounded very distant and quiet, but a girl's still managed to make it through.

“We're sorry, the message you have tried to send could not be completed as cast. Please stop channeling and try-”

“Ba'el, knock it off,” I said impatiently.

“Relax,” Ba'el snide was thick on the other end. “If that thing in your hand hasn't exploded yet then everything is good.”

Now I flinched for real and held the gold ankh as far away from my face as I could.

“Hey, stop moving that thing around so much! It's impossible to keep this connection as is.”

“Excuse me for being worried when you say this thing could explode,” I hissed back after steeling my courage enough to bring the gold trinket back to my face.

“Could? Nah. It will. If you don't stop waving that thing around like a conductor's baton.”

“Is this really the best you could do?”

“Hey! You try working with holy items when your whole repertoire is dark energy,” Ba'el's voice snapped on the other end of the line. “I think I did pretty good all things considered. Maybe next time you can give me something else with magical properties?”

I suppose I was the one that suggested this in the first place. Ba'el overheard me and with a bit of tinkering and magic manipulation, she had created this pair of cellphone like objects. Their range was limited, the connection was terrible and the minutes were garbage; but they worked.

It was the best Ba'el could manage. The only things in our collective possession that could carry the magical charge were these golden ankhs that belonged to Susan. She wasn't too happy to hand them over to Ba'el. I understood why, Ba'el had defiled them, so far as the priestess was concerned. But the benefit of being able to keep in touch over limited distances was reason enough to let the demon do it. The only problem was the natural incompatibility. Ba'el had a thick layer of sweat on her forehead the whole while she worked her magic.

It's like mixing a spark with promethean jelly. Useful when done right, real bad shit when it goes bad.

That's what I remember her saying. What she neglected to mention until now was that there was a literal risk of explosion. But there was still another thing I didn't understand.

“Weren't these things burning you before, how did you-”

“Fufufu~. No amount of magic can turn aside the iron claw of JUSTICE,” A second voice rang out.

And it did ring out. It was loud, proud and the feedback loop stabbed into my ears.

“Stop shaking it, tits for brains!” Ba'el screamed.

Okay, now things are starting to make sense.

“And stop holding it so high. Hey! I'm talking here!”

The demon's voice cried out loud then got quieter. She was jumping up and down right next to Chris. No doubt taking swipes at Chris' wing which was just out of reach.

“Everything is safe and secure here, master!” Chris said happily.

I pictured her giving a salute while she said that and I almost saluted back into the 'phone' reflexively.

“That's good to hear,” I replied. “But the situation has-”

Another crackle of static and distant shouting forced me to hold the ankh at arm's length.

“I said hold it lower, idiot!” Ba'el's voice yelled through the static. “Laven, tell this flying cow here to-”

“Stop pulling! Your recklessness is shaking it,” Chris bellowed out.

The demon's retort was quick, “That's what I was saying!”

These two were not going to be of any help right now.

“For the love of— Where's Susan?”

Another bout of static and then Ba'el's strained voice came through, “Behind the bushes. Taking care of-”

“AAAAAAH! Silence!” Shoshanah's voice screamed out from the background crackling of static.

Now everything makes perfect sense.

“Aw, shut up!” I heard Ba'el yell back after covering the receiver with her paw. “You said watch this thing while you-”

“Not a word!”

Shoshanah's barely audible scream still managed to squeeze in through the static and Ba'el's muffling.

“What? Don't be so uptight. This is why you have to spend so long over there in the first place-”

Ping!

“Zaph re ik cerserav!” Ba'el spat in an infernal tongue.

I've heard that sound before. That's the sound solid gold makes when it strikes bone.

“What in the hells?”

“I warned you,” I heard Susan growl, loud and clear.

“Put on some damn pants, you bitch.”

"Wha-” I could hear Susan's blush through the ether. “I am quite adequately dressed for the current occasion!”

“Maybe I should put this thing on scrying?” Ba'el said in what I assumed was a threat.

“You wouldn't,” the anubis replied.

“Wouldn't I?” Ba'el said devilishly.

“No, you would not. Because in its current form it would fail to assimilate the additional energies and detonate... You'd be closest to it.” Susan said as a matter of fact.

Ba'el swore under her breath.

“A significant factor contributing to my agreement in allowing the desecration of these precious artifacts lay in the fact that I would have some manner of control over your shenanigans,” Susan said.

I could sense the bile rising in Susan's throat. Her temper which she was trying to keep a lid on and push back down was already simmering. The right push and she'd-

“Well then,” Ba'el quipped as though her resentment was just a trick, “It's a good thing I took more and specialized it for-”

Another blast of static assaulted my ears. The sound of arguing and fighting blew away all traces of conversation. My arm was starting to hurt just as much for all the time I hold this thing away from my aching ears. It took some more time till the sound of arguing died down and another voice spoke up among the din of those two having another spat.

“Master, I have liberated the phone,” Chris said proudly,

loud and clear.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“But why call so early?.. Has something happened?” Chris voice perked up.

My relief was short lived.

“On a wing and a prayer, I will be at your side immediately! Through the sky, crashing through ceiling. Glass shattering and gasping onlookers. Quivering guards cower with stained glass raining down upon them. With a flip of my scarf and flourish of my wings I will-”

“Chris,” I said, trying to get a word in edgewise to calm her down.

“Merely say the word. It is but a simple flight to-”

“Vee is back.”

It was that easy to have her stop. The mere mention of that name brought Chris' verbal diarrhea of heroics to a halt. An oppressive silence replaced her jovial tirade against what was previously unknown evils.

“You are certain?”

Chris' voice rose a few octaves; the shock had caused her to break character.

“With my own eyes... And he saw me.”

The look on Chris' face must have been something else, because it stopped Ba'el and Susan's argument below her to stop.

“Whatever is the matter?” Susan asked.

“Vee has revealed himself,” Chris spoke softly, as if the man would appear if you called for him to loudly.

Susan's slow gasp for air was picked up through the receiver, so I expected the expression on both their faces were about the same now. That only left one person out of the loop.

“What the fuck is a V?” Ba'el asked.

We hadn't brought up the man by name in quite some time. It would only be natural that Ba'el would be confused... I was also regretting not watching my language around her.

“We know little,” Susan explained, “but our knowledge of the man includes the undeniable fact that he is responsible for the iron golems.”

“Living, breathing, all metal warriors,” Chris continued.

“And most distressingly, manufactured on a massive scale,” Susan concluded.

“And this is a big deal why?” Ba'el asked.

“It's a big deal because the last time we saw him, the man made an army for a Prince to wage civil war with,” I said. “...And nearly killed Chris and I with a giant golem of his.”

“No, you've still lost me,” Ba'el griped, “Golems are not that big of a deal. Sure, they take a lot of effort and sometimes can be unruly, but it's nothing that-”

“With abyssal energy hearts,” I said, cutting her off. “Pure abyssal energy.”

Ba'el went quiet for a moment.

“Shit. Really?.. How?”

There was an inflection of concern in her voice that I hadn't heard before. But her next question is what threw me off.

“You know what? Never mind that right now... What do you want us to do about it?”

I wasn't sure how to answer that. Panic shook me up so much earlier, that I hadn't thought that far yet.

“Well... I guess I freaked out. If Vee is here, then that means something is going down here. He doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who goes on vacation.”

“That doesn't really-”

“And he looked right at me. With this twisted grin on his face. He recognized me and picked me out from the crowd.”

“And? Rose is there with you, right?”

She was. I looked over my shoulder again and saw her standing guard at the door. But she was accompanied by half a dozen young ladies. I couldn't hear what they were talking about, but I could glean some things from their body language. The women were guarded, but their curiosity had definitely eclipsed their discretion.

"Yeah, she is. She's blocking the door out here to the balcony. Keeping some girls distracted.”

“Then I don't expect this guy to start shit while she's there... And what would a bunch of girls want with her.” Ba'el asked.

“From where they're gesturing... I think they're asking how Rose keeps her hair.”

“Is she telling them with spit and a few brushes of her claws?”

Rose was looking uncomfortable at first, but she put on a smile while she patted the hair bun on the top of her head. The cautious and guarded smiles on the ladies melted into confusion and hidden disgust.

“She is.”

“Hahaha,” Ba'el broke out laughing, “That girl's honesty is a riot.”

“Regardless,” Susan said, “We will now have to maintain a higher level of alertness. If not from the immediate threat of Vee himself, but by what his mere presence possibly foretells. But rest assured, Laven, we are hidden in the woods adjacent to the vineyards, no further than a league. Should trouble arise, merely smash that device upon the ground and we shall know danger has reared its head and befallen you.”

“Right, well, I'll just have to do that then,” I said, trying to hide my nervousness.

There was still one thing nagging at me though...

“Wait, where's Minte?”

She was a quiet girl, so I didn't expect her to speak up, but those three haven't so much as mentioned her.

“Minte has not showed herself in camp since this late afternoon,” Susan said.

“Didn't even show up for the soup I made,” Ba'el added, “And I watched. Made a game of it. But that girl didn't come.”

“I sent her on a mission,” Chris said, voice still high, but back in character.

The wyvern's voice was heard loud and clear, but it took a few seconds for its meaning to process.

“WHAT?” Ba'el and Susan screamed in unison.

“The poor lass was restless, listless. She was worried, so I sent her on a mission,” Chris said with a bit of confusion in her voice.

The other two girls trying to jump down her throat over this was something the girl couldn't understand.

“What mission?” Susan demanded to know.

“To watch over Laven?” Chris answered with a question, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to have done.

I instinctively looked over my shoulder and all around. To the rooftops, over the balcony and in the trees of the backyard garden. A futile effort, if that girl didn't want to be seen, I wasn't going to see her no matter how hard or long I looked.

“We agreed to send of Rose and Laven,” Susan's voice quivered with suppressed anger. “Why would you risk this operation by antagonizing the Count and his quests with a hidden assassin in-”

“That's her job, ain't it?” Chris rebutted. “If there's anyone who can keep Laven safe and not be seen, it's her.”

“She's got us there,” Ba'el agreed.

“However-”

“Let it go, Fido,” Ba'el sighed. “You're not reigning that mantis back in now.”

“What did you call-”

Ba'el continued without letting Fi- Susan snap back, “Besides, now we know there's a mad alchemist on the loose. One assassin up Laven's sleeve is a fair trade for this count making a war criminal, and affront to nature, his house guest.”

Shoshanah could argue with that. After thinking on it for a minute, the fact that Minte was somewhere in the shadows and just a hop, skip and jump away put me more at ease. Rose was unarmed, mostly, but Minte could no doubt cause enough damage if Rose and I were jumped. At least enough confusion for the three of us to make out getaway if this Count turned on us all of a sudden. At the very least a chance for a getaway.

“This will require some more time at to proverbial drawing board,” Susan said. “Laven, you have been absent from the festivities for too long as is. It is time for you to return. But keep in mind what I said. Merely smash the artifact currently in your hand onto the ground.”

“I'll know exactly where you are then,” Ba'el chimed.

The way she said that made me a bit uneasy, but the connection was suddenly cut. Whatever magic was maintaining the line between myself and those three had expired, run out of juice, or this damn thing had already broken. There wasn't anything more I could do, the only thing I had left was to go rescue Rose form that gaggle of girls and find some contract work with at least one of those stuffy nobles. I'd just have to ignore the creep with the power to build weapons of massive destruction staring at me intently for reasons unknown.

I wasn't a hundred percent ready, but I slipped the inert ankh back into my pocket and pushed myself away from the ledge. A simple about face was too much for me, but at least now I could keep my knees from shaking and my breathing from hyperventilating. I slipped back in behind Rose and the wash of warm air and noise struck me again.

“Laven!” Rose said with a beaming smile on her face.

I gave the girls speaking to a quick glance. They stared back at me as though they were looking at something scandalous. Still, the expression on their faces, they were flushed red. The stereotype of the dangerous man fluttered through my mind, as ridiculous as that sounded. Even to me.

“Excuse us, ladies,” I said while putting my arm around

Rose to lead her away.

That left them all in a state of not being sure whether to squeal or report me to the local church authorities.

“Laven?” Rose said, craning her neck to look back at me with a tinge of concern on her face.

“We're being watched,” I said.

I'd have to be upfront and honest about the situation we were in. Keeping it to myself and being concerned about it would only worry Rose. I'd just have to trust she wouldn't do anything brash with what I'm about to tell her.

“Vee is here.”

“That iron guy?”

“Shh, not so loud,” I hissed between my teeth.

We were walking through the crowds of guests who were more concerned with their own conversations, but I wasn't going to take any chances.

“Yes. That guy who made all those golems back at Zern.”

“I remember those, they put up good fights.”

There's that trigger word.

“Well, if he's here, then that means something could be going down. We're going to have to keep a look out... Speaking of which, Minte is somewhere nearby too.”

“You just noticed?” Rose asked so very innocently

My blood ran cold. I stopped pushing her along and froze on the spot. Rose broke free, turned around and looked at me with concern. I was afraid to ask, but I managed.

“Where? How?”

“It's hard, but you can get lucky. Sometimes I see her peek around a corner to steal a glance at you, but she's gone in the time it takes to blink.”

Okay, so it isn't as bad as I thought. If she knew that Minte was here, why wouldn't she... No, she just assumed I knew all along too. Perhaps it's because Rose knew that she was relaxed, all things considered.

“Is that what you ran off for?” Rose asked me.

“To call in that I spotted Vee? Yes, that's why. If he's here, then something is going on. He's not here on vacation, I'll assume that much.”

Rose raised her claws and was prepared to crack her knuckles in anticipating, but I grabbed hold of her arms and stopped her.

“Now is not the time. We can't start a fight right now.”

She deflated like a balloon and her arms went limp in my grip.

“Then what's the rush for?” Rose protested.

“We gotta get clear of the party for a minute and figure out what we're gonna do next. Before-”

I noticed that I could hear those last few words of mine loud and clear. Luckily, no one around us were looking in our direction. Everyone was looking up at the second story balcony instead. My concern lay in getting out of here and somewhere that Rose and I could take a minute to regroup, maybe entice Minte out of hiding as well, but the crowd of people froze like statues and there wasn't any room to push through without drawing attention to the two of us. Over a hundred expectant eyes looked up with respect toward the man who had taken his place above his guests. A lone man with a bald head and dressed the part of both count and host.

The clothes he wore befit a kind more than some lowly count, but so did a bunch of merchants wandering about look just as fine as their blue blooded and silver spoon peers. This count was low in status, but high in wealth. That's what one look at the man told me. I had heard he was relatively young, but his features looked aged through stress. He was all smiles now though as he gave a polite and professional smile to all the bourgeois and aristocracy gathered below him.

The man of the hour was about to speak, but with Vee lurking free somewhere in house, I wasn't too excited to hear what he had to say.

Chapter 87

The clinking wine glasses and hushed whispers of an expectant crowd silenced any boisterous conversation. The change was jarring and it stopped me in my tracks. Roadblocks fashioned from foppish nobles and surly off duty men-at-arms stood around me in all directions; marooning me at the dead center of the ballroom. Luckily the attention of the whole room had turned toward upward and away my frazzled self. I dared not jostle the crowd lest its attention turn back on Rose and I. I'm sure there were plenty of people here just waiting for the right excuse to toss Rose and I out... If we were truly lucky, that's far as they'd go.

But that was a known. What ate away inside me is an unknown. A primal fear bubbling deep down that I didn't know where and how to confront.

My hand was still wrapped tightly around Rose's claw, but when I stopped pulling her along she stepped forward to stand beside me. Rose gave me an inquisitive look. That stagnant warm air of the crowded room had now been replaced by a chill which crawled up my spine, something that shouldn't happen while the unfailing warmth poured out. I'm certain I alone clutched this uncomfortable feeling of dread close to my chest, because everyone around me had polite expressions on their faces. They calmly waited for their host to address the crowd.

Why was I still so broken up? It must be due to who had vanished into the crowd. If he were here... If he was allowed to be here, if he had a reason to be here... I'm certain the expression on my face right now made it impossible to blend in. All the thoughts running around inside my head were an ocean's width away from the matter at hand. My other hand started to tingle and then very suddenly feel as though it was being consumed by frostbite. A cascade of vivid memories sprang back up from my subconscious. I had grabbed hold of that otherworldly... thing. It's death wail echoed in the back of my mind and my veins were not pumped full of adrenaline to quiet it... Its creator lurked in this manor. Loose. And that look in his eyes told me I was the target.

My only saving grace is that everyone was too busy looking upward to notice.

And looking down on the ballroom below: Count Aaron. Candlelight shone off his cue-ball head. That's the very first impression

he gave, leading me to believe he needs a better publicist. His face was worn to the point that no cosmetic could hide it. The man did not give off the impression of a wizened old man, but just some guy who got the short straw in the gene pool. If it were not for all the expensive clothes hanging off of him, you might mistake him for the shifty homeless man panhandling on the street corner. In the end, I could not begin to imagine what stress could cause someone to age twenty years before their time. There were too many strange and incompressible things about this world that could leap out and prove me wrong for me to even try.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the Count began while the room went completely silent. "Serene merchants, venerable men and women of the cloth, esteemed and decorated knights, men and women of fortune. I am humbled that you have all managed to travel from far and wide and across the Empire to be here tonight."

And already the first round of applause roared into life. Roar might be a poor way to describe it; gratuitous and weak, but I found it ridiculous that these people were congratulating themselves for even being here. I wasn't feeling anything from the man's voice. He's not an orator, that much for certain. Rather... He must be telling everyone what they wanted to hear.

I stood idly by until Rose nudged me with her elbow in a tender spot that caused me to flinch. Proper etiquette suggested we both follow suit. Of all people who would, it had to be her. That stung me deep down in a place that wouldn't heal right away. At least this Aaron fellow appeared eager to continue; luckily, this round of applause didn't last long.

"These are trying times we now live in. Not since the time of our forefathers has this world of ours teetered on the brink. Everyone gathered here today: leaders, entrepreneurs and brave warriors and heroes; each one a pillar of The Empire. The Empire which stands as a bulwark against the coming dark. No other has matched it, and none ever shall. For fourteen hundred years humanity has stood united as one people. Together, united, not even the mightiest Demon Lord could break it!"

Yet more applause.

"And so many of you are still wondering the purpose of this gathering tonight... I do not blame you. Despite the best efforts of all the leaders gathered here and now, there exists a threat to these lands

of ours. The idea of this Empire is still strong, as strong as it was all those centuries ago. Yet now we must look to its parts. Infighting, negligence, insubordination... corruption."

He paused again, but no one was applauding this time. They were, however, listening with rapt attention.

"Yaleria has watched over these lands for longer than the Empire's flag has graced the wind. We Yalerians know of duty, I know few who would challenge me there. The great bloodlines of this duchy have stood upon the Brightwall and spilled much blood to keep the claws of ancient horrors that lurk behind it from wrecking chaos on lands. The Shadelands are a realm that must never be allowed to pollute the gardens of the Almighty..."

I've heard of these things. The climate of this land seemed rather odd and it seemed to be caused by some magic means; it certainly didn't make sense from a geographic or meteorological reasoning. A foggy haze blanketed Yaleria and you could see the sun overhead for about a quarter of the whole year. I was actually a little surprised to see a flourishing vineyard in the count's backyard. It's a surprise that anyone manages to live here at all, the growing season must be a nightmare. How could anyone carve out a life here, let alone have what's necessary to throw an elaborate party to show off one's wealth?

This land apparently boarded another where the sun never rose above the horizon at all. That should be impossible, obviously, but I haven't caught anyone else treat it as fiction. And I couldn't write it off either... Not after walking through that desert in the far north. Both places were improbable, the result of a curse. This particular curse seeped over to Yaleria and throttled the daylight all year round. What manner of creatures wander a realm where the sun doesn't rise? Apparently the living dead. That was enough to send a chill down your spine if the lack of a sun's warmth didn't do it for you.

"...But that is but one duty we citizens of Empire aspire to. I look no further than Duke Terigrewl."

Count Aaron waved his hand over the crowd toward a portly but stout man. A large bald spot had been carved out by age from his auburn hair. It compensated the long narrow beard that reached down to his chest. Unlike the Count, or any of the other members of the crowd nearby, his arms were thick and round, but with muscle. Standing beside him was his equally portly, but plump wife. Besides

the distinctively huge ivory and black pearls she wore around her neck, there wasn't much to say about her. That's all I could really think and be polite.

“A man who by dedication to the Empire and with stalwart and commendable seamanship drove the merfolk from Droug Bay.”

A generous round of applause and modest wave of dismissal from the Duke.

“Now the sea routes along the South-West are considerably less dangerous. And the fall spawning grounds that thousands of fishermen, mongers, and tens of thousands of Imperial citizens rely on for food are once again liberated.” Count Aaron turned and waved his hand to tall lady in white cloth robes on the opposite side of the room and said, “And to those that keep the peace-”

The crowd turned its attention to the woman with perfect rigid back posture. Her plain face remained stoic and unmoved when the rest of the audience looked in her direction.

“With grace, patience and wisdom: Bishop Regslaw managed to mediate and bring a decades old blood feud within the Morgan dynasty to rest. So many of the same blood tearing one another apart, the blood stained lands beneath their feet that they claimed over one another was becoming a breeding ground of despair. Ripe for outside forces to plunder and corrupt the faltering hearts of men and women who resided there. But her holiness' calm and motherly temper soothed the raging beasts of war. Now the soil itself can heal and the corruption be pushed back.”

And then the man raised his hand back up into the air.

“And of course, we could hardly overlook the endeavors of __”

Count Aaron's expression petrified and his next words got caught in his throat. It didn't take me more than a second to figure out why; he looked right at me. A jolt of anxiety struck me and that seemed evidence enough that his eyes were locked onto me. The Count's eyes raked over me like hot coals as they slowly turned to the girl standing on my left. I couldn't help but follow his gaze, but Rose wasn't doing anything extraordinary. She existed... That might be enough.

There was about a three meter gap in the crowd behind us, so it might stand out a bit if you were looking at it from above. Rose's fiery

tail gliding across the smooth ballroom floor would cause people to keep their distance; fire tends to do that with any living thing that doesn't have a death wish. And now the audience started feeling something had gone wrong. It wasn't taking them long to figure out its source. A crushing feeling bore down on us, yet Rose maintained that optimistic and oblivious look.

"—all those gathered here today!" Count Aaron said, suddenly raising his voice louder than before.

His voice echoed loud enough to grab everyone's straying attention, myself included. The count produced a handkerchief from his pocket which he used to dab large beads of sweat off his large wrinkled forehead while his ragged breathing quickly came back under control. With his other hand, he continued panning his hand across the whole room after pointing it at Rose and I.

There were a few errant glances our way from those around us, but they eventually returned to pretending we didn't exist. Regardless, Count Aaron managed to save his little speech by the skin of his teeth. We too were saved. We were balancing on a knife's edge here, that much was for certain. The law is certainly our side, but not the hearts and minds of the other attendees... Or maybe they were terrified for Rose? Sure, she's a monster, but in that green dress of hers... She didn't look the part of a wolf loose in the hen house. Or is that just me thinking—

"Yes. Troubled times are ahead, so that is why it is indeed important to reconnect with one another and pledge ourselves to our duties as stewards of this land of ours. It is we who have inherited these lands from our forefathers, the very ones who spilled so much blood to prevent humanities extinction. We can not shame them now by failing the legacy they have handed down to us... And to do so in place of those currently not with us this fine evening."

And with those words the mood suddenly dropped again. It seemed planned this time though.

"I will be honest, many of you have no doubt what this evening meant so many moons ago. Our planned guests of honor are not with us this evening. One taken by grief, the other taken before her time. All your support upon hearing of my dear fiancé's passing has truly moved me and I glad to know she meant so much to so many people... And I am sure she also meant much to the man who was to be my brother-in-law: Duke Malco. The dear but absent Brenden could

not make this night. No less than eight months have passed, but he still refuses to leave Blackstone Keep. He overlooks the Brightwall day after day, committing himself fully to the task his dearly departed father handed down to him, as his father's father entrusted it to him. Let us all offer a moment of prayer for the Duke."

And in predicable and polite fashion, everyone bowed their heads and raised their hands in prayer. Rose and I looked about, bewildered, but mimicking those around us to not to disrespect or stand out any further. I couldn't resist stealing a glance upward at the man throughout while everyone else had their eyes shut and staring at the floor.

"Oh, Almighty. Hear those gathered here today. Let our prayers be heard and may your mercy find your way into Duke Brenden Malco's heart. Save him from his despair. Let him know the love of his countrymen those across The Empire are with him. Save his soul before that shadow in his heart consumes him. Amen."

And a chorus echoed out for that final word. But I felt as though there was something not quite right about what he had said. Maybe it's because while I looked up, the expression I saw was not serene. His lips were curled as though it hurt to speak those words.

"But let us not wallow in the mire, tonight we shall not sully her memory by making celebratory evening anything less than a grand ball."

Count Aaron turned toward the orchestra gathered and waiting in the corner of the room and gave them a nod. With the signal given, the troubadours played on their assortment of instruments which were both eerily similar to ones I was familiar with and others alien, yet played sounds and notes like any other... And this string of notes sounds a little familiar too me... It was off, but similar enough to make the image of a river pop up in the back of my mind.

The ballroom began to clear as once more people broke off into groups and pairs. Like the social butterflies they were, they fluttered from one group to the next look for fertile grounds to hobnob with one another. After all, this might be their only chance till after the fall harvest to meet with as many important and wealthy people in one place. Aside from the music, nothing had really changed. That and the fact that Count Aaron himself was descending to join the festivities. For every couple of steps along the balcony there appeared some new person waiting for their chance to speak with him.

I felt another tug pulling me in the opposite direction. A powerful grip wrapped around me arm and yanked me out of my stupor. Rose's glistening amber eyes met me when my head snapped around in the direction I almost fell over in.

I spoke first to try taking control the situation, “Rose we need a minute to—”

“Come on!” Rose shouted with a bubbly smile on her face.

“No, wait—!”

I never got the chance. Rose pulled me in the opposite direction from the nearest exit and straight into the middle of the ballroom floor. As the music slowly built out of its intro and toward its first verse, the couples gathering in the space created readied themselves. A few of them had to make way because Rose wasn't going to shy away at the fringes of the floor, she had to drag me right into the center... I knew that music playing should have filled me with more dread.

Right in the center of this ballroom, while dozens of eyes turning our way, Rose pulled at the hem of her poofy green dress and curtsied. Although she put on the airs of a proper lady, the tail behind her wagged back and forth like a happy dog. Embers poured forth and that alone told me how excited and happy she actually was. Usually her tail smoulders and flickers, but it is time like this when there's a real fire hazard. That gave us plenty of room at the center as well.

Against my better judgment I bowed as I should. I did it on reflex, but I didn't get a chance to stand up straight and redirect Rose's energy. Just a moment later my left hand was seized and crushed. Anyone looking in might think she laid it there, but she actually held it up like a noose around my neck. She easily pried my other hand from my side and wrapped it behind her waist. With that same hand, the one she used to nearly tear my arm off, she daintily lifted one corner of her dress. When the introduction ended, she started to move and I couldn't do anything else other than follow her as she slowly spun round and round.

I remembered another time like this. We were alone and on a balcony away from prying eyes. Except now a hundred people watched. The looks on their faces were dumbfounded. It seemed like no one had anything to say, not even in whispers. Could it be her brashness, or do salamanders not dance?

This was a lot different from a drunken romp around the tavern though. Rose moved as she wanted and pulled me along for the ride, but at least her motions were refined and followed a very deliberate script. She'd have to, otherwise we'd be stepping on each other's feet. She beamed at me while we stepped in circles around the ballroom floor.

I could not help but smile back and I almost didn't notice that Rose leaved behind a train of fire along the floor where her tail dragged over it. The gasps of surprise were quickly met with sighs of relief when these flames died out on their own. They did leave behind a pretty light show though, it was like an overexposed picture of car tail lights.

Rose kept pulling me along with her with each step she took. Stepping on her talons would be a little easier than anyone else's dainty heeled slippers, but while I had to steal a quick glance downward to watch my feet, Rose kept looking forward at me with overwhelming confidence. At least I remembered the first few steps, but Rose kept on changing them up. Maybe to keep it interesting? But my heart skipped a beat when I was suddenly pulled out of the rhythm. She appeared to care more about matching the steps to the melody of the music instead of playing it safe.

“Relax, Laven,” Rose whispered.

I snapped back like a taut elastic band, “Easy for you to—”

“—Move like we practiced!” She beamed.

Rose had been pulling me along, but now she threw herself forward. If I took a wrong step I'd fold over backwards and onto the floor, with Rose in a heap on top of me. I slid one foot back and braced with the other as they met together. With one more to the right I wheeled around and redirected her which caused her to twirl about once before falling back into my arms. The audience gasped in delight as the green hem of her dress twirled with her fiery tail roaring and fire crackling behind her. Somehow, this all seemed real familiar.

“We never practiced—“

Hold on. There's that feeling. Rose on the attack and myself reeling. She kept the same pace as one of her spartan sparring sessions... Without the sword swinging and the beatings... Really, everything was about fighting with this girl. She carried over that

passion into everything else she did.

“You relaxed yet?” She asked with a playful grin.

With everyone watching, I'd have to say:

“Obviously not.”

“You've been leading for the last bit.”

In one sense of the word, sure, I'd have to— No. Rose pushed herself into me and I had to deal with all that energy... Which I guess is another way of saying—

“Lift me,” Rose said hushed.

“Wh-”

“No 'whats'. Next spin. Do it.”

On reflex, I grabbed her by the waist. She then jumped into the air and kicked her legs forward and back, prancing through the air. The crowd awed again as I caught her and brought her back to the dance floor.

“Now you're just trying to show off,” I hissed back between clenched teeth.

“No retreat, Laven. We're on the attack now.”

And she picked up the pace and intensity of the dance, so she really meant it. Rose wasn't giving me a chance to get another word in edgewise. Every breath I could soak up was to power my legs, not my mouth... No retreat, huh? That's what she said... Wait. Was this whole spectacle to stop me from—?

“From behind, hug me,” she ordered.

I was caught off guard and did exactly what I was told on reflex. With her claw in my hand, she spun around and stepped back to that her back pressed up against my chest. Her tail slipped off to the side, the hot flames brushing up against my thigh. Many in the audience gasped as though preparing themselves to witness my skin bubble and boil with third degree burns. While I held her, she raised one leg straight up into the air which caused the furls of her dress to ripple. Her talons rested near her head for a second, I saw her prepare to axe kick someone at first, but she gracefully brought her lithe leg back down

instead.

“Spin me!” She commanded right into my ear while looking back and up toward me.

Her leg pointed sideways, her inhuman talons pointing exactly horizontal. I held her claws in each hand, one to the side and the other above. While she balanced on the talons of one foot, I spun Rose around and she rotated as graceful as a spintop. She ended it while facing me and slowly falling over backwards so that I had to catch her and pull the girl back, her other leg kicking up into the air and flourishing her dress' frills once again. We then stepped back into the waltz again and spun round and round the center of the ballroom floor.

I think I lost track of how long we had been at it now. The real way to tell was by listening to the music which seemed to have finished its final bridge and wound down to the conclusion. Rose and I finally came to a stop when the last few notes played; we were both panting hard. I couldn't think of a reason how this much of a workout could flush Rose to a shade red like— No, wait. I know exactly why. Oblivious to everything else around her, she slowly pressed in closer and closer. She slowly lifted herself up on the balls of her talons and her face got close. Real close. My heart skipped a beat, but it was the near stroke I'd feel when the audience broke out into a jubilant applause. Rose broke out of her stupor and nervously fixed her hair as we turned away from one another and bowed.

“S-see?” Rose flustered. “It’s our turn to make a go at it.”

That feeling of dread I had from before had certainly been blown away. All those looks of distrust, suspicion and disgust had melted away. Those hundred pairs of eyes looked much softer now. My anxiety had been straightened out and the chill down my spine had long since departed. A warm feeling had crawled my arm and flirted with my heart as it stretched across my chest. Rose's claw and my hand were interlocked by the fingers while we waved with our free hands to the now dwindling applause.

And then came the flood. It didn't matter if the troubadours were going to play another song, the party goers broke away from the actual dance and back into their social dance. Rose had looked as though she wanted another round, but this flood of people killed that idea off rather quickly.

“Bravo,” One respectable lady lauded.

Another praised, “A fine display!”

The accolades were smothered upon the two of us and the curious crowd crushed inward to the point Rose and I were forced back to back. A lot of people from all manners of the Empire's high life had a lot of questions to ask. After the initial crush, they remembered themselves. Like the well mannered aristocracy they were, the crowd became an endless barrage of people who wanted a minute to speak with us.

Meanwhile, Rose feasted on steady stream of hors d'oeuvre. Or did she merely intercept whole platters when they strayed too close? I saw through that strategy of hers. Since her mouth was full, she wouldn't have a chance to speak. She'd no doubt shove her foot in her mouth if she did. The fancy and polite speech of the nobles as they prattled on all around us bored her. Only the methodical chewing of enough food for five (maybe more) stimulated her enough now.

Their questions were not directed fairly at all. Rose smiled at me with her cheeks puffed out and full of food; a cheeky gesture that was too preoccupied and content to help. A disarming smile. I suppose that's fair, because if she did the talking... I'd expect disaster sooner rather than later.

The questions came in such rapid succession that I could not get any questions of my own answered. All I could do was piece together a bunch of holes in an ongoing puzzle. The one thing people wanted to know about the most is the situation in the North. News from there had apparently ceased. It didn't surprise me. I only had to look back at all the insanity we had to go through to get this far south. What with an important bridge and a giant ship being removed in the process. Traders, nobles, clergy and knights, none of them seemed to have a good grasp on what was going on. I found that hard to believe, but here they were: asking me of all people. They could show me a map and I'd have a hard time pointing out where I am right now.

And those questions that came were all quite predictable. A few dared to bring up what all the others were dancing around: 'what was going on in Domdracveria?' they asked.

Is it true that a dragon sits on the throne?

That much could not be contested... The competition had been soundly dealt with. I saw it myself.

Is it true that the Princess has been rather taken with—

No comment!

Will the dragon princess be sated for long?

...That question always caused me to pause. I think that one question, asked over and over again, was certainly the sum of all fears. Violetta had been such a frail and shy girl. Breaking that seal had transformed her into a whole other person. She brimmed with confidence and power.

I knew exactly the root of this fear, because one time I uttered it as a threat in the heat of moment. The weight of those questions, and the assumption I knew the answer, told me the gloves on treatment of Rose and I meant I didn't even need to utter that threat.

Domdracveria was a tiny little mountain kingdom at the extreme north end of The Empire, near the boarders of an endless sea of trees and empty tundra beyond that. But almost all of that used to belong to little kingdom during its golden age thousands of years ago. Would the Dragon Princess move to return it to those days? With the deterioration of law, order and intuitions connecting the Mid and South-lands with the north; would it be really that much of a stretch to see the North revolt? How long had things been relatively peaceful? Forty years?

But I had yet to get a chance to explain why I was here in the first place. No one seemed to care about that.

“At last— A chance to meet the man of the hour,” A voice, the very definition of passive aggressive, said from somewhere deep within the crowd.

We turned and saw Count Aaron approach; the crowd politely made way. He did not come alone, a pile of weathered muscle walked beside him; muscle in the vague shape of a man. Scars crisscrossed his entire body and made patches in his brown hair. A wafting stench came off him that overpowered every other scent. A repugnant narcotic. It seemed that the only one nearly retching from it was me, but it did cause Rose's nose to twitch in irritation. I wondered for a moment why this man had been allowed to walk about freely in the first place, but that smell vanished as quickly as it had hit me.

While my sinuses recovered, the next thing to be shocked were my eyes. The man was armed and had a chain coat underneath his padded coat. A sword swayed in its scabbard at his hip as well. There

wasn't a single one of the Count's guards in the room, so I felt something was very wrong. I could sense Rose shifted beside me and in response I took my own step closer to stop her from doing anything rash. Yet that man didn't train his eyes on Rose, they were burning holes into me. A pair of black coal-like eyes which smouldered with hate.

That's when I pulled my eyes away from his own and spotted a familiar insignia. Silver with a trim of red, woven in the exact same way, but with its own distinct patch. A Silver Bannerman. Thoughts of those adventurers aboard that ferry came flooding back. This was not good. He's the opposite of Count Aaron, the man who approached us with all the necessary civility of an ideal host. But his words were bold, daring and served to mask the venom:

“Greetings, sir... Laven, was it not?” The Count said, all smiles.

“Yeah, that would be me,” I replied, tense.

He turned his eyes reluctantly to my right.

“And this must be the infamous—“

Count Aaron looked over to Rose and the twist in his face worried me. It wasn't the end of the world, but something was off. I looked over gradually to see Rose had migrated to a platter of shucked oysters. A loud glassy crunch gave me goose bumps when she bit down on the whole thing and began grinding the hard shell into gravel. She finally noticed everyone's gaze and gave her own curious look in return.

She didn't flinch. Rose showed no sign that chipping or breaking a tooth was a valid concern at all. She glanced back at the scarred man who for the first time looked back at her. I spied a trace of sweat on his brow. He's nowhere near as bad as the count who with each passing moment looked as though he had literally stepped out of a sauna.

I've had my— in there— I shook my head to clear away those thoughts.

“Rose... You're not supposed to eat the shells,” I said.

“Why?” She asked.

'Because you'll break your teeth' came immediately to mind, but I suppose that actually didn't apply. The more I thought about it, the more I recalled her cracking bones apart with her teeth to get at the marrow.

“Tastes like a good source of minerals,” Rose said whilst taking another loud crunch out of the remaining half of the oyster,

That— I wasn't sure if she made a joke, or if it were serious. I'm not sure I could actually disagree with that either. It's the first time I recall her eating seafood though, so maybe she didn't think bone or shells were any different. I hoped Aaron hadn't spent the last hour or so collecting his nerves, because the subtle quirks in his expression told me that's exactly what he was doing. Those paying attention to our little public conversation seemed to notice, but remained silent.

“I-I have heard you have traveled far from the North to be here tonight,” the Count continued, “What brings you so far south in these troubled times?”

“I have business in the Free Ports,” I answered truthfully.

“A daunting task. For someone without a sizable retinue.”

“We've made due, so far,” I shrugged. “But the walking doesn't bother me as much as the tolls.”

Aaron smiled and turned sideways as an invitation to walk with him. His intimidation game had suffered a set back, so I think he desired a change in location and in mood.

“To ensure proliferation in the Empire. Old laws which have proven necessary in these times. Without it I could see massive migrations toward city centers.”

I stood my ground.

“I see massive migrations regardless.”

The Count sighed with the kind of heft to it that told me he was prepared to explain something a toddler should have already understood. The tinge of condescension slipping through his kind smile rubbed me the wrong way.

“Evacuations,” Aaron declared. “Controlled for their protection. Lessons were learned since they last occurred forty years

ago. Entire regions were abandoned and others were overpopulated. Overpopulation leads to strife and strife leads to stressed institutions. People fall through the cracks and become prey to the succubi."

With a new fire in his belly, the man turned himself back to face me.

"There are pockets of monster controlled areas everywhere and some populations are more at risk than others. In order to defend them, the Empire must consolidate them first."

"And milk them dry while you're at it?" I spat back.

"Laven, The Empire's resources and manpower are not infinite. It can guard some highways, but not all of them. Those that move south on their own will have to make due without imperial protection. Nothing is taken from them, the only thing asked for in return is their labor when they reach their new homes. Their new communities will adjust, with time, and The Empire will reorganize. New lands of opportunity are opened all the time for those adventurous enough to plunge into the frontier."

Like Brun: That quaint little town I stumbled into... It feels like a long time since then.

"And they are hiring all the time?" I asked.

"Not to the likes of you," he replied coldly.

His polite host's mask faltered for a moment.

"Were you not aware? I thought you might have heard by now."

"About what?" Rose piped up, the Count's shift in tone breaking even her away from that platter.

"Monster companies have been harder to come across lately. Demand has... waned."

The scarred man beside him showed the first hint of a smile. A corner of his lip curled up for a second. I had a second to catch it from the corner of my eye.

"I am surprised to see the likes of you here. Such a sight was not so uncommon a year or two ago. But it— how do the peasants

say it?... The chickens have come home to roost. The story of Earl Iilic has made its rounds. Perhaps the bards and rumor mongers have yet to move it north? I suppose they wouldn't, not with how the roads and rail have been recently. You see, Mr. Laven, Earl Iilic. A man more like you than I guess you'd care to admit. The outlaw problem had struck him just as hard as anywhere else, so he allowed a roving band of orcs and goblins to take up residence in the forests of his fief. No charge. Keep what you capture for yourselves. That's the nature of the deal he made... And it went well. Until his son and heir had an encounter with their war chief."

I swallowed hard; a series of memories flashed before me Running through the northern woods with an entire war band of pig-like women chasing after me.

"Eloped. Pah!" The Count spat. "Yes, I'm sure the boy spoke the truth with the note he left behind. That's when the war band turned inward and on the Earl's castle. He fled to the capital while his lands were seized and became but another demon realm dotting the maps of the Empire... One of many tales, but enough for the Church to stop turning a blind eye."

"Rose's guild status still stands," I said between clenched teeth.

They verified it with some sort of magic at the Count's gate.

"Free Port bureaucracy," he replied.

"The Treaty of Lannic," I shot back.

Shoshanah stressed that last night. When in doubt, speak of Lannic: that's what she had said. I had been wondering about these fabled Free Ports for a while, but never asked why they were called Free. Well, Shoshanah meditated on it for a couple nights and figured out the laws in play that made it so. The Sea of Lannic was the great ocean to the south of the continent and this treaty gave the Free Ports dominion over them.

Those city states are free because of that thousand year old document the Empire signed off on. Apparently not even the full might of the Empire could push a handful of rich city states into the sea. That first emperor of theirs was a military genius, but apparently there was another kind of genius living in the Free Ports at the time. Giant cranes on the harbor walls that could left whole ships into the air and drop them back down, shattering them to pieces. Sewer systems that were

labyrinthine which no man could solve and only a trusted few memorized their maps by rote. Great big walls and other wondrous inventions that kept the cities secure.

The sieges went on for almost a decade, the granaries showed no signs of depleting and the Free Port fleet controlled the waves. That Emperor capitulated to a deal in favor of the Merchant Princes. A Demon Lord's army could have arrived at anytime, so he could not afford to spend too much time breaking those cities. They would hold onto their little strip of land along the coast at the cost of paying tribute. Each city would retain their sovereignty and The Empire would not meddle in their trade and internal affairs.

A thousand years later, and with monsters how they are now... If profit could be made, the Free Ports would do it. They don't give a flying fuck what the Emperor or the Church has to say about it. One of the Doges, a bishop and the Guild itself signed off on it, so Rose's status as a mercenary with the Free Ports was set in stone. And that's why we needed to get down there as soon as possible. We'd finally have all the breathing room in the world to sort our affairs.

We just had another thousand kilometers or so of increasingly hostile Empire to get through first.

The same gears seemed have been turning inside Count Aaron's head.

“Well, even so... Those papers are unprecedented. For this, this Thorn Knight, to obtain them-”

"Hey! My friend worked hard on those,” Rose shouted, sensing an insult on the tip of the Count's tongue.

She took a step forward which caused the Count's muscle to lower a hand to his belt. Rose caught the soldier's sleight of hand and came to a stop. It was too subtle for most to see, and the other guests around us didn't notice, but the Count and I locked gazes and stared one another down.

“If you keep hiding behind thousand year old walls, even you will run out of time eventually, Laven. You and Malco both will learn that the hard way,” the Count said.

Aaron's cryptic warning did not have long to set in. A silky voice spoke from behind the wall of guests and brought the escalating situation to a halt.

“Duke Malco, you say?”

All four of us turned toward the voice and the awed guests who made way for a single woman. She stood out... An understatement for sure. Wavy locks of platinum blonde hair framed her fair complexion face which hide two sapphires, two radiant blue eyes. Her gait was sensuous and the black long cocktail dress clung to her curves and left little to the imagination. A pair of heeled stilettos encased her small feet, long lace gloves and stocking crept up her arms and legs. A captivating beauty, not unlike gazing upon a fine cut diamond of immeasurable worth. I looked to Rose and she looked to me. I had felt my heart thump and I had looked over with concern, but the salamander had been just as impressed as I. Rose was a ruby in comparison, but nowhere near as elegant and refine; clear but uncut.

And dangling from a chain around the woman's neck was a small blue gemstone that matched the color of her eyes. It was so small, smaller than the other jewelry she wore as bangles on her arms, the tiara on her head or the rings on her slender fingers. It put an uneasy feeling in my gut.

“—Perhaps you have seen him?” She asked with fluttering eyelashes.

“—N-no, mam,” the Count blustered with his face turning red.

Whatever charms she oozed, it was hitting him a lot harder than it was me.

“As I said earlier, he failed to arrive.”

“Hmm~” She hummed with disappointment.

“And whom, might I ask, looks for—?”

“Hyria,” She replied with a courtesy.

There was not much skirt to courtesy with. She looked at the muscle for a moment and just by laying her eyes on him, it was as if she had punched him in the gut. The man's huge frame shivered for a second before he ground his jaw shut and looked away. His sword arm twitched and his right hand clenched, but the woman lost interest in him soon enough and left the soldier to deflate once she removed the pressure her mere gaze exerted.

“A pleasure,” the count managed to say and finally offer a smile, “I am—”

“—And you must be Sir Laven,” Hyria said with her own smile as she turned toward me. “And Rosette, The Thorn Knight. A pleasure.”

“You've caught us off guard. You seem to know us, but—”

“I shall call upon you later tonight,” she said bluntly and with her eyes fixed on me.

“Hey!” Rose said placing a claw on my chest and stepping in between the two of us.

The woman, Hyria, turned her gaze over to Rose. The same pressure hit her too, but she held her ground and furrowed her red brow back at the woman's slack expression.

“Rest well. The Counts manor is open to all guests for the evening should they require.”

The woman locked back upon the Count again.

“Is it not?”

Her words were heavy. By now the beauty of the woman and the peculiar air about her had attracted another sea of eyes toward us. Aaron could nothing but nod under the pressure.

“B-but of course. What manner of host would I be— if I did not accommodate my guests?”

She spared a smile for the count and then turned back toward Rose and I.

“I feel your being here was meant to be. You may help me and I shall help you in return. For the price of one favor.”

Was... Was she hiring us? Someone finally—

“Tonight. When I call upon you. The details are.... Private... I cannot speak of them here. Until then— Rest.”

Between that and a blink, the woman's expression softened as though she was suddenly a different person altogether.

“But first, we should all enjoy this fine evening,” Hyria said with a warm smile.

And just as suddenly as she had arrived, she walked away and approached the other guests of the party. The men melted in much the same way the count did. Much to the annoyance of their wives. Aaron had at some point stepped away and disappeared back into the crowd. Although I could not say the same for his muscle who carved a path with his wide shoulders and mean stare as an icebreaker. No doubt the Count was in front and storming away in full retreat.

I could only imagine the blow to his pride.

“Right— well, that was something,” I said. “Maybe now we ought to—”

A strong and powerful warmth seized my hand. I dared to look down and follow the arm it belonged to, all the way to its face which beamed brightly back at me.

“—Take her advice!” Rose cheered.

I heard the music warm up once again and I was pulled off my feet.

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Hours later... Too many hours later. We trudged through the hallways of the Count's manor. I took deep breath after deep breath as I followed Rose. She smelled of wine, but she had a spring to her step. That tail whipping behind her glowed bright and flared occasionally. No doubt burning off all the excess alcohol which fueled it instead of made her tipsy or drunk. Meanwhile, my stomach growled. I didn't have a chance to eat a thing. Certainly not with that event horizon for a stomach nearby.

We followed a nearly petrified maid through the winding hallways till we reached a suitable guest room on the far left wing of the manor at the top floor. Far, far away from the other guests I assumed. That maid forgot all her manners and professional and speed walked away before running as soon she went around the corner. She would be flogged if she acted like that for any other guest. I sympathized with her and Rose couldn't be bothered. We threw ourselves into the room.

And what a room it was. Worthy of five stars with the candles

already lit and a pitcher of fresh water prepared. I helped myself liberally to it, because I had been on my feet for hours spinning around that dance floor. After I freed my swollen and throbbing feet my boots of course. No time to care about the carpet and the drapes, I kicked them off and dropped down in a soft leather chair.

“Finally!” Rose groaned while closing the door.

Her claws whipped around her back to pick, tug and pull at the strings holding her dress up. She was desperate to free herself.

“You're going to rip it,” I warned.

“They'll fix it,” she retorted. “Besides, you ain't getting me back in that thing. Not ever!”

Snap. A taut string broke and Rose pulled the dress down toward her ankles and kicked it free in one motion. I sat in the chair, the dress landing at my feet. Rose stood in the middle of the room, naked except for her black string panties. A soft aching groan reverberated off her while she cracked her back and stretched her arms across her chest. Her bare chest. Large breasts swaying and bouncing back and forth with each flick of her hips, twist of her waist and shrug of her shoulders. I tipped the glass of water up high and shied my eyes behind it, but couldn't help but look all the same... Not that the clear water and glass blocked anything at all.

“You know what? I'm hungry,” she said suddenly.

“You ate half the platters down there yourself.”

Rose locked onto me and pointed accusingly with an outstretched talon, “And I danced one and a half of that off!”

“The chefs won’t be up now,” I sighed. “And Aaron's men will be patrolling the grounds. Don't agitate them. I'm sure they won’t take kindly to the famous Thorn Knight wandering around late at night with a lot of other important dignitaries locked in their rooms.”

Rose leaped forward and pinned me to the chair by slamming her claws down onto the arms of my chair. She leaned over and stared right into my face. At point blank. My eyes kept darting down and back up.

“That's a risk I'm willing to take,” she said resolutely, but with expressionless focus on her face.

And she pushed herself away, walking toward the closest with her tail and behind swaying behind her. Next, she freed her hair which had been in a bun atop her head. Her long vermillion hair unfurled down her back and danced all around when she shook her head to unclump and separate the last of the stubborn strands. I took another swig, but my glass was already empty and I felt the heat and started sweating it all out after just drinking it... My face didn't feel red... But another part was... Dammit! I wasn't flushed or freaking out about her walking around like that, but I had gotten hard as a rock. I was getting too familiar with this kind of play.

During my self reflection and minor revelations, Rose found a bath robe to tie around herself. She deftly tied the rope belt into a knot and struck a fighting pose with her clenched claws at her waists.

“Alright... gonna find more of those clans.”

She then marched on her merry way while whistling one of the waltzes from earlier.

“Clams, Rose. Clams... And no you don't.”

I leapt up to stop her and squeezed through the door as it closed. I gave chase and luckily, she hadn't started sprinting yet. I could thank our distance from any kitchen or pantry for that. She didn't know where she was going, or what or who she'd stumble into before catching the scent. I grabbed hold of her by the wrist and dug my naked heels into the rug.

“Hey,” She pouted when I anchored her to the spot.

“Come on. You've had more than enough. Just let what you got digest and you'll be fine.”

It was a struggle to drag her back. Especially when she got her claws into the stonework. She acted like a petulant child, but I did manage to eventually drag her back to the room.

“Sleep it off, okay? Right now, we gotta talk and figure out __“

As I placed my hand on the door handle, a faint voice snaked its way into my ear. Someone was inside the room. I couldn't afford to wait as Rose gained strength and would start pulling me along with her at any moment. I steeled myself and pushed it open suddenly, afraid of

what intruder awaited us.

Someone was definitely in there alright. A mass of green stood at the center of the room illuminated by the flicking candlelight. A small figure, twirling and spinning slowly around. It held up a sheet and sang quietly.

“La, la laa la, laa la,” the quiet girl's voice sang the chorus of that waltz from before that Rose had stuck in her head.

My eyes adjusted and fixated on the girl: There Minte stood. Her eyes were shut, her human ones that is, and she appeared to be in her own little world. She held Rose's green dress up by its sleeves. Just as you would if you were trying it on and wanted to make sure it was the right size. But the way she stepped... she mimicked those dance steps of Rose before. Not particularly well, but she tried. And the way her arms were placed... As if she had an imaginary dance partner.

It took about eight seconds or so before on of her mantis eyes pseudopupils swiveled in my direction. She froze on the spot. Her head slowly turned toward me, emotionless, but with... were they little wet tears forming in the corners of her eyes... And despite whatever efforts she employed, her face quickly turned from pink to pure red.

Thud. Twang~. The dagger hidden up the sleeve fell from the sleeve and stuck into the floor. Its hilt vibrated back and forth for a few seconds more and was the only sound aside from Rose, still in the hallway and caught in my grip, that could be heard. But when I froze too, caught up in the awkward moment, Rose stopped pulling and came around on her own accord to see what was going on.

“Hey what's the big idea—“

Before Rose could stick her head in Minte dropped the dress to the ground and kicked it under the bed at an inhuman speed and unnatural precision. But that meant she didn't have the time to disappear before Rose peeked her head behind me and looked into the room and locked eyes with the mantis girl.

“—Minte?”

Yeah. The surprise and confusion in her voice was like my own. But before anyone could walk in on this, I stepped inside the room and Rose followed on her own accord. I let the door close behind us and I made sure to lock it tight.

Chapter 88

The day was done, but the night was still young and full of uncertainty. It left a feeling in the air that something foreboding lurked out of sight. I first caught a glimpse of it through Vee's steely gaze and crooked grin and that'd be enough to kick things off, but it became the air itself that felt wrong. We've run across our fair share of troubles these past few weeks, but this felt like a force greater than any single man. I wasn't sure how to explain it. Perhaps Shoshanah or Ba'el could explain it? But first I 'd have to know how to quantify it. Something heavy and cold hung in the air; nothing felt quite right. Instead of letting paranoia consume me I focused all that energy into something productive: such as watch the rest of the manor through a pair parted curtains like some crazy old cook.

And so Rose, Minte and I waited here in this room; all for some vain hope that a sensuous and mysterious woman would reappear and be true to her word. It sounded a lot worse after thinking about it then I thought it would... She added to that feeling of something being out-of-place. Yet she didn't feel hostile. I had my reservations, of course, but we couldn't be choosers in this economy. I'd ask Rose or Minte's opinion on it, but my attempts to bring it up kept hitting a brick wall. They were busy with other things.

“How are you gonna stand guard right when your IN the room?” Rose chastised a stone faced Minte.

“—Too many patrols,” Minte replied.

She answered too slowly for Rose's liking.

“And that's different from a couple hours ago how?” the salamander growled, her tone becoming increasingly incredulous.

Rose wasn't particularly pleased. She starred Minte down with her arms crossed in front of her chest and a talon tapping impatiently against the stone floor. Rose's animated hand gestures took up so much of this now crowded space that I retreated to the edge of the room so I wouldn't get caught up in that firestorm.

From the window in that corner of the room I spied a fog bank as it billowed in. That crawling cloud of white certainly fit the bill of something heavy and cold. It made the job of the guards difficult, the patrols they marched became increasingly random as they toughed it out. And there were quite a few of them this evening. Minte was right about that. How useful they'd be in this weather is up to debate. My

thoughts strayed with it and I felt a sense of sympathy with them. It came in so suddenly and jumbled everything up. Like with what happened at the ball; if I couldn't watch them by the candle light they carried they would vanish into the cloud altogether. Yet none of this seemed a matter of concern.

Yaleria had no shortage of soggy marshland and depressing swamps. Moisture and high humidity would be common place, but this heavy and unnatural feeling in the pit of my stomach was as unnatural as the sudden change in weather.

“Well~?” Rose said while leaning in and nearly grinding her forehead against Minte's.

The assassin remained as motionless as a statue. Her antenna twitching and probing the air showed the only signs of life.

The manor as a whole remained eerily quiet, just like Minte. The hubbub of other guests' footsteps was nowhere to be heard. A party happened here a few hours ago, but no one stumbling out of the dark forest and soggy marshland at this hour would know it. You couldn't fault anyone who was here for forgetting it ended an hour ago. Most of the guests had already left. Those few that remained had to rest up for much longer journeys. All those plutocrats sleeping as their carriages rocked gently along the country dirt roads. I envied them, what I'd do for a taste of that relaxing atmosphere.

“Twenty-two Silver Bannermen waiting in the cellar,” Minte finally answered.

Rose leaned back. A frown appeared on her face instead of a wild grin like I imagined it would.

“Maybe more,” Minte said before her eyes darted in my direction.

I looked away and kept watching the patterns of the guard's patrols down below. The intensity of Minte's eyes wrung my heart out, the last thing I needed was more to worry about. For now, I'd let those two settle this out on their own.

“How do you reckon that?” Rose asked. “Getting that close to a bunch of—“

Minte pulled a rather large bottle of liquor from behind her back. Yes, that's something that would be kept in the cellar. Rose took it and

inspected it, smelled it and then uncorked and sampled it. She nodded and returned the gesture with an appreciative smile.

“Did ya mange to sneak a peek at any ranks?” Rose asked.

“Second class,” Minte replied, immediately this time. “Redeemers.”

Rose's frown turned into a sigh and I heard her step away and pace back and forth. I pried my eyes away from the window and watched the two. But that wasn't enough, so I had to ask:

“Is that a problem?”

I recalled the ferry from weeks ago that was full of them. I'm still not sure which of us were more surprised to find one another, but they didn't seem well coordinated despite how well armed and trained these Bannermen were.

“No amateurs, that's for sure,” Rose said. “A couple tours under their belts at least. And redeemers to boot.”

“—And?”

“Criminals,” Minte answered. “—Formally.”

“Jobs for tough stomachs. Mean lot,” Rose said. “Guess you'd stick em in the cellar to make room for the guests.”

“Jobs doing what? Odd jobs like guarding ferries?”

“Nah,” Rose said waving her claw dismissively. “Silvers keep ta the frontiers where they reclaim land. Pushing out monsters and squatting on ruins to dig up magic things. Rings, swords, armor, you name it. Finder's keepers. And some things they keep can get nasty.”

Rose jogged my memory and I recalled that one knight on the ferry with the weird shield. It certainly looked magical and had some pretty odd properties to boot.

“So an expendable group of ruthless criminals seeking clemency who dig up ancient treasures?”

“Sounds about right to me,” Rose affirmed. “But what were they doing down in the—”

From behind her back, Minte produced a burlap sack. Her sleight of hand is something else. Where exactly did she keep all these things hidden behind her back till now? Anyways, the sack's filled to the brim and the bottom of it was damp. It leaked with what looked like grease and oil. As before, Rose got excited and swiped the sack full of food. This time, however, she draped her other arm which held the bottle over Minte's shoulder.

“Minte. You are my best friend,” Rose said dryly, her face stoic and sincere.

The salamander wrapped her other arm around the shorter girl and bear hugged her. Minte's eyes went wide with surprise, but that might be because she was being squeezed to the point they were ready to shoot out of her sockets. She didn't make so much as a peep because all the air in her lungs was ejected when her ribcage almost imploded. Now satisfied, Rose let go and the mantis almost collapsed into the ground in a heap. Minte wobbled for a moment while trying to catch her breath. Rose plopped back down in a nearby chair and got to work emptying the bottle and sack's contents into her insatiable gullet.

So we're standing on top a prison cell for a penal company? That one guy certainly looked the part. He looked rough, tough and scarred as if a rake had been dragged over his face more times than once. The hulking man fit the stereotype of someone who had spent more time behind bars than as a free man. But that created more questions than answers. Why would the Count hire him, or a group of them? He didn't appear to be short on cash, so it couldn't be because there's a discount on hiring them... If there was one.

“And if they are a bunch of blood thirsty murderers for hire—you don't show it,” I said while tearing myself away from the window. “I figured you'd either be excited or worried.”

“Short leashes,” Rose said with a shrug and a mouth full of chicken breast. “Besides...” She took a deep breath and began counting off a list of reasons with her greasy claws. “We're at the end of the hallway, so we got a bottleneck in our favor. This room is on the top floor and they'd all have to cram through that window behind ya. I doubt that posh sod of a noble would wanna rattle the whole house with all the guests here. Oh! And we've already broken bread. We're guests like all the rest. Can't touch us now.”

“—More than just the bread,” I quipped quietly off to the side.

“Right! I'd say I'm near running on all boilers at max,” Rose boasted while flexing her arm and swishing her fiery tail behind her.

This morning I feared this would not have been a productive day, but now a new carrot on a stick dangled in front of us. We had wagered everything on attending this little party, the last of our money is now gone and what food we had crammed into our packs were exhausted yesterday. There was no choice now but to see where this carrot led us. Bannermen be damned; the three of us crammed into this guest room weren't leaving ‘til dawn.

I turned back to Minte now, the girl predictably standing silently at attention behind me like a shadow.

“Thanks, Minte. Rose was ready to raid the kitchen.”

I used the word raid with all meanings of the word. Minte averted her eyes and looked off to the side with a hint of red to her cheeks. And while I had a moment, I had to ask:

“Last thing we need is her and them butting heads... That doesn't explain why they're here.”

“Looking for something,” Minte whispered.

“That much for sure— But...”

I paused for a minute. There was a reason and logical conclusion beyond all this. The devil you know pales in comparison to the one you don't. The Silver Bannerman were a known. They were organized, accountable and with a clear cut purpose. Treasure hunting, mercenary work and real estate. The devil we didn't know, the unknown, worried me.

“By the way, did you happen to catch sight of Vee?”

The girl looked back, up and then tilted her head inquisitively. Right. Minte wouldn't know every detail from the last time we met the man.

“A lanky and gaunt looking man. Bald, white coat, serious face...”

There really wasn't any other way to describe him, was there? The more I thought about it, the more he became a mystery. His face

is forgettable and only his presence left an impression. I felt the same about his motives. For our last encounter, he built a small army of iron golems. When we met face to face, the man experimented with a much bigger version... But from what he said, I got the impression it wasn't the golems themselves that intrigued him, it's what powered them. Of course, the expectation that Vee offered the same services to this Count came to mind. But that shouldn't concern me, so why did he stare at me like that?

“The one getting yelled at?” Minte's barely audible voice answered.

“Getting yelled at?”

“The big scarred one. He yelled at someone like that.”

On one hand, it's nice to know I wasn't crazy and seeing things before. On the other, it'd be difficult to accept that Vee actually was here. The fact that this Bannerman and Vee weren't getting along was interesting though.

“Where?” I blurted out.

Minte flinched and raised her hands to protect herself. I raised my voice without realizing it and my own hands were hanging in the air. They were almost grabbing hold of the girl on their own accord. I lowered them back down and took a deep breath, hoping that would calm the girl back down. A weak muttering of an apology escaped my lips; overcompensating for how loud I was before.

“Near the servant kitchen,” she answered while lowering her guard. “In the basement. Next to the cellar. I heard them. Caught a conversation before leaving.”

“You got within earshot? There's more than twenty of them. Why would you—“

“Laven~ relax!” Rose shouted from behind.

Minte and I turned to look and Rose had broken into the bottle already and more than a few mouthfuls were missing. The rest of it sloshed around inside while she tore and snapped a chicken wing in twain, bone and all. She was already slouching in the chair and getting extra comfortable.

“Rose. Are you drunk?” I asked while approaching her

cautiously.

“Drunk? Me? No way~” She slurred again.

A closer look showed me that her eyes had gotten incredibly glossy and her cheeks were flushed beet red. Her tail, slipped through the openings in the back of the chair, was sputtering and letting off flashes of hot air from a fire threatening to burn out of control.

“Hey, when did you learn to afterimage like that?” Rose said, pointing a claw past me, “Did you teach him that? I didn't. Hell, that's something I've always wanted to do. Could never figure that one out.”

I looked back at Minte who stood there with a dumbfounded look on her face as she looked to Rose and then back to me as a specter of worry cast a shadow over it. Double vision, I presume. Yes. Rose is drunk and in record time too.

“Come on Rose,” I said while leaning down to help the girl, “We have a meeting soon. I don't know when, but any minute now there could be a knock on that door.”

I retrieved a handkerchief from my suit and wiped off Rose's greasy claws. At least those scales and boney red armor had no oils to make this an even bigger mess than it could be. Rose didn't resist, but she didn't help either. I felt no different from helping out an exhausted child with how lethargic and loose she was. I took a moment to inspect it more closely. It had a green tint to it, with a plain brown stained label. It didn't have any runes on it, rather some illustration... Or maybe it was in cursive. I haven't had the time to practice and memorize this place's alphabet and grammar yet.

“Minte, do you know what you picked?” There were more choices than this, right?

“I picked the strongest smelling,” She said

Strongest smelling, huh? It was sealed before Rose got to it. I held the collar of the bottle up to my nose and sniffed: Nothing. I tipped it up and let a drop drip into my mouth. My mouth burned and felt as though it were lit on fire. I liked to think I had some tolerance, but I gagged and coughed from that much alone... And there's already a third of it gone.

It was also clear, odorless and burned like hellfire. Minte rushed in from behind and rubbed a hand over my back to soothe away my

hacking and heaving. How the hell did she smell anything at all? There has to be a limit to how sensitive those senses of her are. I rolled the bottle over once again and look at the label. Perhaps I'd find some clue to why—

"Minte..." I called her out between a few last coughs. "Was sniffing and feeling it out all you did?"

"No."

"Okay... Then do you mind telling me what this label is?"

I held it up to her and she gave it a quick glance before answering innocently.

"Two fires burning together... Thought it fitting," She said.

A gift that would be fit for Rose I take it. It was a bit of theft, but I given the circumstances I didn't really feel bad for the Count. He was rude despite us being his guests... Okay, we were not invited per se, but an open invitation and a technically still count. That's not what's important right now though. There's something else that needs addressing which is much more pressing.

"No, Minte. That isn't two fires. That's two people."

I pointed out the blue and red painted on the old label. This random scribble and wavy pattern that would typically depict fire. Drawn were two people entwined together. Minte blushed and looked away after I outlined the pattern with my finger. This couldn't be some hard liquor. It wasn't just any old high proof vodka. If I had to hazard a guess, this is either drugged for non-nefarious purposes, or outright magically altered. For nothing else than—

And Rose got into bag again. This time she quickly went through one oyster after another; and she didn't crunch down on the shells this time either... That made me think: maybe she isn't that dense, but actually played an intimidation game... But never-mind that! She flushed red and loose. I do not want to deal with her when her stomach is bursting with more oysters. Sure, call it an old wives' tale, but I'm not going to take any chances. She was also still making a mess out of herself.

"Rose, you need to lay off it," I said while cleaning the corners of her mouth with the handkerchief. "Let's get you down on the bed so you can burn it off."

I know she could burn off the alcohol if she really wanted to but she was being stubborn and silly on purpose. If she fancied herself a real warrior, she'd never allow herself to get that drunk.

Despite how inebriated she looks, Rose's claw moved with lightning speed and unerring precision. It seized me by the wrist in the time it took me to blink. There was no expression on her face at first, but a sleazy smile quickly spread her lips across her face. The handkerchief in my hands fell to the ground as Rose's face drew closer to my anchored hand. I tried in vain to pull back; my shoulder dislocating was the only reward I'd receive if I ignored the pain and kept at it for long.

"Now now now h-hold on Rose," I stuttered. "H-how about we go and get some fresh air? It's a little stuffy in here, don't you think?"

I was prepared to pull a one-eighty on everything I've said to this point. A bit of a night stroll through the fog, in spite of all the creepiness and unknowns in this manor, seemed to not be that bad of an idea right about now. There may have been a pang of shame in my chest if I weren't as terrified as a cornered rat.

The salamander didn't care at all. Her tongue slipped out from behind her lips and licked up the length of my index finger. My arm from the elbow up, where it could still move, shivered as her body heat predictably transferred from her to me. A layer of clear saliva remained where she traced her tongue slowly across my skin. It took a simple tug to free my middle finger from my clenched fist and she ran her tongue along the crevice between them.

That body heat of hers didn't take long to wash over my chest, and try as I might, it reached my waist in record time. A package inside gradually surpassing its original wrapping. My inability to look away from the sight caused it to get worse. More so when she took both fingers into her mouth and suckled on them. Sensuous moans hummed out through Rose's nose as her tongue rolled around and between my fingers.

I felt a tugging from behind from Minte's arms wrapping around my waist. She tried with all her might to pull me away. I was surprised, but perhaps I looked distressed because she must have noticed my attempts to get away and sprung into action. As fierce as she can be battle, the girl is still delicate. Minte freezes in situations like this. Her

heart couldn't handle situations like these. A quiet grunt and groan here and there told me she tried hard, but wasn't able to overcome Rose's drunken strength. I hardly budged backwards at all; her wings buzzed sporadically into action.

When she finally released my fingers from her mouth, I watched the silver trails of saliva suspend briefly from the tips of my fingers to her lips. The scent of fresh pine and campfire radiated off of Rose and the saliva itself smelled of hickory and sweet sap. Rose's body heat had made its way to my head, so I suppose I couldn't be too surprised my senses were fuddled; these salamander pheromones hit me hard. All the tenseness if my hand and arm melted like butter as her claws, the softer under scales of her palm, crept up my arms, back down and then gripped my hand in hers before interlocking our fingers.

Her tail sputtered, flickered and rose to greater heights. I'm terrified it would cause the chair to catch on fire, but she stood up suddenly enough for it to tip over backwards; clattering against the stone floor, bouncing twice, and away to safety. The look in her eyes told me that this level of foreplay would no longer be enough to quench Rose's drunken lust.

If I wasn't having trouble thinking due to the rising temperature, the fact that she had control of both my arms wouldn't have eluded me until it's too late. Rose went on the offensive and began walking forward. I couldn't muster the strength to stop her and neither could Minte whose feet held onto a rug, but couldn't brace the two of us. The poor mantis took the brunt of it as Rose pinned me up against the wall. She let out a yelp as her body hit the wall and I got sandwiched between the two girls.

Minte's arms which had been wrapped around my waist were now frantically reaching around for anything at all that could give her leverage, but flailing about is all she managed to do. To my front, Rose had me right where she wanted me. Her smoldering desire did not hesitate and she stood on her tippy toes. Rose angled her head and our lips met, but that wasn't enough for her. She greedily slipped her tongue in and chased after mine and I remained powerless to prevent it because of my slackened jaw. Our noses almost caused a fire all on their own due to the friction as we rubbed our faces together.

When she finally backed up for air, Rose pecked her lips across my neck and collar bone. She worked back up to my cheek which she licked and savored the sweat of my brow which poured down my face. The whole time I could do nothing but hold my nose above the roots of

her long vermillion red hair. It held in every sweet scent of her person. I caught myself greedily burying my nose in it; inhaling the smokey smell of pine. Meanwhile, a pair of delicate hands moved across my groin. Minte struggled and squirmed while patting down my crotch. Accidental I'm sure; the yelp of surprise when she did gave it away... But her hands were driven back by curiosity and her own lustful instincts.

As my body temperature rose, the bodies colliding against me became more distinct. The brow of Minte's hair tickled the back of my neck, the antenna atop her head probed my head and shoulders, her modest breasts pressed up against my back and her silky smooth stomach and thighs rubbed up against me. In front of me I felt Rose's ample bosom and the heartbeat behind them. The warmth of her smooth light bronze thighs rubbed up against my own, all while the heat from her wagging tail created a stuffy aura of heat which cause the illusion of a wavy mirage behind her.

Rose's bathrobe didn't stand a chance of lasting one more second as it slipped off her shoulders and fell into a heap on the floor around her ankles. The titillation of the fabric hiding her breasts, crowned with cute pink nipples, to her hips and legs lifted. My eyes were treated to the sight of her naked down to the scales that covered her arms and calves. She clung tighter than before and my body burst out into a profuse sweat before my body temperature finally matched hers.

“Heh heh,” Rose's lustful face cracked into her usual sly razor sharp grin chuckled. “You can try and play it cool, but you know I'm too hot for you.”

I couldn't retort. My breathing had become hot and heavy as I tried to inhale the night air to cool my head; but it was in vain because the whole room had become a hotbox of lust. Rose's heat had turned the chilly stone floor into the baked tiles of a sauna. The pitcher of water which sat near the window at the far corner of the room was turning to steam.

My hands were released from her vice grip after pulling me forward and away from the wall. Minte wavered to and fro before dropping down onto the ground knees first. Her rolled about in a circle while her eyes were swirls and the sweat on her brow become steam rising up toward the ceiling. Although I won my freedom, for now, I did not have the strength nor will to put a stop to anything else. Rose's claws reached for the strings holding my dress shirt together and

ripped it apart in one go. The scaly palms of her claws massaged over my chest before moving down to the belt loops of my pants. She had the same amount of patience for them and ripped the string tying it around my waist. With one rough tug, Rose pulled the pants down around my ankles.

A pair of boxer shorts stood as the last line of defense, but the elastic band proved no match as Rose easily pulled it down to my knees so that my raging erection throbbed and danced before her eyes. Rose's eyes were still glazed over and drunk, but they glimmered and shined while studying the shaft and crown. She rubbed her cheek against it and took in the musky scent while pressing her nose up against the ridge of my glans.

“Laven can be a wee bit stubborn, can't he?” Rose slurred drunkenly and directly into my penis.

The heat from her breath was enough to cause my knees to shake and nearly buckle.

“But~ He's honest here~ And not one bit wee either.”

Rose's tongue slowly and seductively slipped free from behind her lips and ran down the shaft of my cock. Her long tongue which had to be at least an inch longer than average. She teased me one or thrice before bringing the head of it into her mouth. Her lips wrapping around the glans entirely. The salamander did not stop there. Rose slowly made her way down the shaft and it felt as though my dick had been submerged into a melting furnace, the kind which could make short work of steel.

I was not consumed by a painful sensation of burning, but a soothing wave of pleasure from my every muscle relaxing while each nerve writhed in pleasure. I could have fallen backwards into what felt like a warm bed on a bone chillingly cold day, but I grabbed onto her by the hair and the fins of her ears. The leathery and scaly ears of hers twitched and heated up with a simple touch and her whole body shook. She endured a minor orgasm from just that. With her legs spread and squatting down below me, the ground beneath her expose slit sloshed wet due to her nethers drooling in anticipation.

A rustle from behind me drew my attention and when I looked behind me I saw a flushed and flustered Minte staring at the two of us. Her face hid behind one hand while the other unconsciously drove between her tightly shut legs. Our eyes met and she squirmed as if the

mere embarrassment from being seen were no different from my hands caressing her all over. The flush of heat washing over her was too much and she too began to shed her chitin armor and shredding her bodysuit off to expose the pale white skin underneath.

My head snapped back around when the soft sensation of Rose's lips neared the base of my shaft and the tip of my penis rubbed against the back of her throat. I could not stifle the groans as my member bent and slowly slid down her throat. Her head rocked back on reflex, but she fought against the gag reflex and deep throated my cock. The deeper it went, the more fierce and unrelenting the heat and without mercy she held it there for seconds without end. Rose pushed herself to service it and her hazy eyes watched my face to receive the reward she looked for. My slovenly face as I heaved and panted while my dick felt as if it was melting. One of her claws reached down between her legs while the other pressed up against my pubis and made a wide ring around the base of my dick with her thumb and index claws.

Rose finally pulled her head back so she could breath, but slowly worked her way back down the shaft again. Her tongue wrapped around the shaft as it undulated and massaged the throbbing vein of my dick. And then an attack came from behind. One small and delicate hand crawled up my thigh while another cupped and pulled at my balls. It could only be Minte whose face pressed up against my backside and her lips kissed up against the wrinkles of my sack. She nibbled, sucked and rolled them over on her tongue.

The attack from both sides was too much. I heaved over and grabbed a lock of Rose's hair in my right hand. My left hand reached back toward Minte, but all I could mange to grab were her antenna. Her voice was muffled by my sack and I could feel the jolt of electricity running through her body as she aggressively attacked back with her mouth. The squeezing sensation around my testicles, along with the contours of Rose's burning hot mouth and throat over my dick, proved to much and I couldn't stop it when the pulse surged through my hips.

Rose pulled back at the moment of release and with a free hand stroked the base of my shaft to coax the rush of semen into her mouth. I emptied everything I had and at last Rose released me; the air of the room felt like a shock of cold compress compared to the insides of her mouth. Minte also retreated and I stumbled off to the side where I nearly flopped down onto the ground.

The bottle of aphrodisiac alcohol somehow found its way back

into Rose's grasp. Now resting on her knees, she took a long breath with a viscous white jelly rolling over her tongue before tipping the bottle up into the air. She did not hold it up there for long, but her cheeks did puff out now, ever so slightly. She crawled over on all fours toward Minte. The mantis had collapsed down onto her butt and didn't have the presence of mind to sense Rose approach.

The salamander tipped the mantis' chin up and pulled down her lower lip. She opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue, the white viscous semen, mixed with the clear liquor, drooled forth. Rose's tongue met Minte's and they pressed together; their steamy breaths clashing and mixing into a singular cloud of steam. A globule flowed down from Rose's mouth into Minte's and made a mess of their lips and the floor beneath them. Rose had Minte securely by the chin and shoulder while Minte's hands reached out and either tried in vain to push Rose away by her breasts, or merely looked for something to hold onto. All the same, Minte let the cocktail slide down her throat; her indigo eyes quickly glazing over just like Rose's.

She is a real lightweight.

The defensive and elusive mantis did not squirm or protest as Rose's tongue ran along her lips and chin to clean up the mess dribbling down it. With her claw and tongue, Rose scooped up and licked the mess off her own face and spared not a drop that hadn't already fallen to the ground.

“I think we're even now he he~,” Rose whispered with a devilish laugh.

That was her idea of sharing and reciprocation in her current state of mind. My state of mind wasn't much better. When I looked down I noticed my rock erection had enjoyed the show.

Rose dragged herself up off the floor and seized Minte while backing up toward the bed. She spun the mantis around and pulled her down onto the downy sheets. Her mantid abdomen pressed up against Rose's chest and locked securely away between her parted breasts. A pair of red scaled gauntlets reached down and scooped up Minte's white soft thighs and held them up. With her vagina exposed and spread eagle, Minte would of course cover her face in embarrassment, tipsy or not.

“He's always shy the first time, but a real beast the second,” Rose cooed. “If you're gonna butt in on my fun, then you're gonna

have to play hard and keep up~”

She was on the ball saying that. I became a passive observer in my own body as it lurched forward toward the bed with my spear in hand. One hand of mine grabbed Minte by the back of one ankle and pushed it high and backwards behind her head. With the other I twirled my cock around the edge of her exposed labia. I sawed her smooth and bare pubis with the back of my dick, running it over her tiny red clit and she squirmed with nowhere to run. Her delicate hands roughly grabbing handfuls of the sheets and tearing at them in an attempt to brace herself.

I pulled back and plunged myself between her lower lips with one push. The soft, wet and ready walls took me in all the way to my stomach. My shoulders lurched forward as my penis curved and molded to reach into her deepest parts. A minor orgasm ran amok through her body on insertion and I had to grab hold of her other ankle to hold the mantis down. Minte's usual quiet voice escaped from her throat in panting moans. I'm not sure if she knew completely what's going on by the look in her eyes, but her body certainly knew. The flesh inside constricted and wrung me like a washrag. I carelessly yanked my dick free to plunge it back in where it met a warm welcome reception.

Rose continued to grin while holding Minte close to herself. A steady stream of her inner fire pouring into Minte's petite frame. Minte's blood flowed, her white skin flushing pink; the nipples crowning her b-cup glowing red. Rose held Minte in place as I picked up the pace. I might have otherwise plowed the girl right into the bed and into the floor. The salamander's tail continued to swish and burn more violently.

But that wasn't enough, was it now?

I pulled out and let my throbbing red cock hang in the cool air. My body protested, but I held my lustful instincts at bay for a moment. I let go of Minte's legs and let them fall down on top of my shoulders. I leaned closer in and reached down to cup and roll the soft muscly flesh of her ass. I parted it to reveal a second hidden hole. Spreading the cheeks apart, the puckered sphincter twitched as though it remembered. An oozing of Minte's hungry vagina and my own leftover precum lubricated it and so when I crammed my head into it, there was not so much resistance as I thought there could be.

Minte clenched her teeth and her back bent like a bow. It's as much the erogenous spot as it was before. Even Rose had trouble

holding the girl steady, and when she threw her head back, the girl almost headbutt Rose in the face. I continued to massage the pillowy muscle of her glutes and coaxed my cock further in the ridiculously tight space until I had nothing left to give. Rose's claws released Minte's legs so they rested totally on my shoulders. That freed her hands to pick, pull and caress Minte' still throbbing cunt.

My eye nearly got poked out by Minte's antenna which prodded my face and rubbed all over my body. They were too wild and unpredictable, so when they strayed too close to my mouth, I clamped down on one and kneaded it between my teeth. Minte's quiet voice broke out into a shrill moan that's totally unlike her. A hint of her real voice unmuted. A chiming feminine wail while her tongue now hung lewdly out of her mouth. The other antenna curled in on itself like a chameleon's tail.

I kept thrusting bestially until I felt my ball's second wind winding through my hips. Minte's insides also began to contract more fiercely with greater frequency. Unlike her vagina which pulled me in, her ass kept trying to close tight around my cock and push it out. I fought against it and savagely pounded her ass until I reached my limit and jammed it in as far as I could. A squirt of lube shot from her pussy and it quivered; her ass closed around me so tight I thought it might snip me off at the base. Rose giggled with delight as Minte howled in pleasure and I grunted like a naked ape. I could feel the undulating flesh of her pussy through her ass which also squeezed down and greedily took in every shot of semen that exploded and painted her insides white.

Pulling out right away was impossible. The three of us panted and hung around in the afterglow. I retrieved my member all in one piece. Minte's asshole twitched and struggled to return to normal as a flow of white semen oozed out and onto the bed sheets. My cock did not flop out though, the damn thing is still hard and standing tall.

Rose's claw reached over and grabbed me by my tattered shirt. I was swept off my feet and pulled down onto the bed. My body rolled over and my head hit one of the soft pillows hard enough to cause a small eruption of goose feathers. I couldn't sit back up because Rose pounced on me and pinned my stomach to the bed with her ass. Her long red hair cascaded down toward my face as she leaned over me, the girl's face redder than before, her breathing heavier than before, the girl's lust now completely out of control.

“Husband~” She moaned.

“Y-yes?” I stuttered nervously.

She didn't say a thing; the girl leaned down and ran her tongue over my cheek. The lusty expression on her face gave way to her signature toothy grin, albeit curled and awkward. My eyes instinctively looked to her tail which was no longer burning out of control.

“Rose, you— You could have burned that off at any time!”

“Eh heh heh heh~” She laughed. “I don't need anything, not even Minte, getting in the way now... I gotta do this, feel this, myself.”

Rose turned sideways and raised my left knee up. She slipped her right leg under it while she securely placed her left against my right hip. She then lowered her pussy, her hot like the sun pussy, down on my little soldier standing at attention and ready for duty. I grabbed hold of her thigh to brace myself and her soft scaly palm rubbed and massaged my chest while the other grabbed hold of my knee. Her head turned and looked down at me with a glowing radiance, her hair disheveled and wild. Her perky breasts swaying and heaving, jiggling ever so slight with every violent heart beat. I could sample it all, her ass included which perched down against my navel. Her tail swayed freely off to the side and caused Doppler waves of heat with every motion.

And I felt my dick go into her vagina sideways; the tight interiors pulling and twisting my boner into the shape of a boomerang. Rose rolled her hips forward and back, lifting herself ever so slightly before dropping back down. I lost track of where I was and where I wasn't inside Rose. Everything from my hips to the crown of my cock remained a haze of heat and pleasure. My body wanted more, but Rose kept moving gently, methodically. Her vulva rubbed against my thigh and every motion caused her to let out of steamy breath of hot air.

I did something ridiculous with my right hand: it reached on its own not just for her ass, but grabbing hold of the flaming tail at the base of her spine. No sane person would ever willingly grab fire like that, but I apparently had lost my mind. Every survival instinct my animal brain had couldn't stop me and I squeezed down hard on the red boney and armored scales. Her fire didn't scotch or melt my hand to its bones and reduce them to ash, but it did give Rose quite the jolt. She must not have expected it because her hips rolled forward quickly in surprise. The softer underbelly of her tail had a more pleasant and

smooth sensation and that caused Rose to jolt forward and give out a little yelp.

And that was the end of gentle foreplay.

Two quick grinds proved too much stimulation and our bodies mutually agreed we needed more. Rose picked up the pace as my hand moved back between the muscles of her bare bronze skin ass and red scaly tail. She pushed me deeper into the bed with one claw while she cupped and kneaded one of her breasts with the other. I kept rubbing my other hand over her smooth toned thigh, the muscles twitching excitedly with each gentle caress and squeeze.

“Ah~ Laven~” Rose moaned. “I don't need some— some stupid potion in the way of me and my husband.”

“Rose...” I groaned.

“The open road... Adventure... Nights like this, all with you— Is all I need.”

She doubled the pace.

“Because— I'm... in... love, and I ain't ever gonna stop!”

My lips moved before I had a chance to think, “Rose I—“

But something dropped down on top of me. Wet, warm, smelling of pure lust. I nearly drowned trying to breath through my nose which had entered into a whole other world. The sight of smooth white skin filling my vision.

“Hey!” I heard Rose cried out.

I reached up and felt a familiar pillowy sensation. A quiet moan rung out in response. Above it the smooth feeling of chitin which emerged from out of her backside. Yes, Minte had recovered and wasn't satisfied. She sat herself right down on my face and my head caught between the vice grip of her thighs.

“Hmph,” Rose pouted as her competitive edge kicking in.

She wasn't about to lose and so she put everything into it now. Meanwhile, breathing became difficult for me, and the only way to save myself was to push this girl off me... No, pushing her off would be impossible. I would have to loosen her up so she'd roll off on her own.

She had but one reliable weak spot, so I traced the contours of her impressive ass until I felt out her anus. I kneaded the cheeks and pulled them aside so I could plunge a finger inside. It went in surprisingly easy since everything is still wet and loose from before.

The response I got was the sound of Minte's wings buzzing and escaping the confines her armored chitin abdomen. My cheeks were smushed together and my lips becoming like a fish, and to top it all off Minte's arm blades swung into action and buried themselves into the bed sheets.

Okay, bad idea.

Any notion of gentleness was now banished. Minte rocked her minge across my face, I had my finger up her ass and my other hand gleefully kneading her buttocks, Rose was now riding me hard and the feeling of hear had spread to my legs which felt limp, numb, useless, yet tingling with pleasure. I would shake my own hips, but they pinned completely to the bed and made me prisoner while attacking me at both ends. And a candle that burns at both ends cannot last long.

Rose's tail once again erupted, and although I could not see it, the heat was undeniable. Minte pushed herself against me as she bent forward enough that she almost wrapped around my head, the feeling of her naked breasts tossing and teasing my scalp. A warmth greater than what I have felt thus far gathered in my nethers. It felt as though a part of my life-force went along with it. A lump of semen, the last of it, stubbornly began to clump in my shaft and waited for the right time to strike.

I could see nothing, but I heard the moans of Rose and Minte mingling together. When Rose pressed all her weight down on me, and I heard her orgasmic moan above Minte's, my completely engulfed cock fired everything it had. My body's convulsions caused my fingers to crook and Minte reached her limit as well. Her body uncurled and bent over backwards. I wasn't aware what unsightly face or noise I myself made; there's too much stimulation and pleasure from every which direction assailing me.

Rose couldn't pry herself off me when she collapsed down onto me. My member inside her went flaccid, that much I could feel. We remained attached as she slumped over and wrapped herself around my torso and hung on tight, panting and heaving and completely exhausted. Minte's arm blades retracted and down feathers escaped from the mattress and sheets. Her limp body fell to the other side of

the bed next to my head and she wrapped her body around my head once more. My chest heaved and I breathed in the stuffy hot air. I tried to register what just happened, but I was too exhausted. My vision became hazy, foggy and I drifted off into sleep with the warmth and smoothness of two bodies cradling me.

Chapter 89

Bong

A deafeningly loud gong reverberated through the air. It forced my eyes open from a dreamless sleep, but I immediately noticed that there was no soft bed at my back nor a ceiling above. An infinite expanse greeted me, the only company being a grey fog drifting within the boundless world of white. My body stood on its feet, and my clothes were already on.

When I looked down, an acute episode of vertigo assailed me; the infinite expanse of white continued downward forever, a sole transparent glass pane held me in place. There were no shadows; there was nothing for it to cast over, not even myself. I stood in a place which defied all logic. A quick self inflicted Indian burn on my left arm registered no pain, and only then did I finally realize that I was dreaming.

That put the matter to rest, but it didn't help me at all. Knowing this is a dream didn't grant me any cool powers of flight and control of my surroundings. To be honest, I felt cheated. I took one cautious step forward to see if I had at least control over my own body. My foot clopped down on the invisible barrier. An eerily loud sound not unlike tap shoes on linoleum echoed outward and gradually died. Yet no reason to walk existed. Without any landmarks, it was impossible to tell how fast or how far one could move in this place.

As if to assuage my unease, the billowing grey fog banks got were caught up in whirlwinds which slowly left behind tangible shapes. The expanse below me came rushing forward till I could see my own shadow cast all around me. Brilliant bright tubes of light above me replaced the omnipresent illumination of the expanse and took the form of florescent lights. A confining hallway quickly encased me, and I nearly panicked when it moved so fast before stopping that I thought it may have crushed me with blinding speed and force.

It was one terrifying thing introduced after another. From existential terror, to vertigo, onward to claustrophobia to phasmophobia. Specters which were vaguely in the shape of human beings whirled into existence out of the fog. They were no more than silhouettes that congealed into smokey existence before dissolving again when they strayed too far from where I stood. A haunting chatter just beyond my ability to hear droned with what seemed to be a dozen conversations creating the white noise of a crowd.

And at last, after all the bizarre sights, this world came into focus. Doors, windows, chairs and even posters on the wall. Many of the words melted on the pages, but I could make out some of them. They were recruitment posters for club and sports activities. A few were activist and informational ones about trivial and meaningless things. One advertised a special lecture on organic chemistry from some guest professor. The rest were those pages with the peel-away tabs looking for roommates or desperate individuals looking to unload an old car, furniture or appliance for emergency cash.

I very quickly got an idea where I was.

And on cue a man came around the corner with a hurried step to his gait. A thick down winter jacket hung from his shoulders. His cheeks and nose were cold bitten and red, but a layer of sweat poured down from his forehead. His arm had a red binder tucked underneath, and he clung to for dear life. As if his life depended on it. The two of us were on a collision course because I stood in the middle of the hallway like an idiot, but he passed through me like mist... Or perhaps it's me who passed through him like mist. Either way, I recognized the man.

It was me.

My brain refused to respond to Houston's calls, and my own mind felt as together as the fog. I shook it violently and watched myself jog into the distance. The ghost looked left and right for other people before breaking off into a run, slowing down just to avoid crashing into someone, or when going around a corner. I managed to pull my feet from the floor when the world started to collapse. It began were that ghostly self of mine came from. This world is not centered around me; it's centered around him.

The threat of oblivion finally cohered from frozen nerves to let my panic stricken self run. I watched as the flat level ground and everything resting on it, melted down and finally fell downward to infinity. That's something I could live without experiencing, thank you very much. And so I ran, but the collapsing world was not just behind me. It also crept up toward me when I reached a T intersection. I looked to my right, where that ghost had run to before, and noticed the world still existed there. That put to rest any doubt that my only way to avoid doom would be to follow myself.

Catching up to him proved harder than I thought. I very nearly ran around a couple corners into the encroaching white abyss. I turned

around and sprinted the other way to avoid getting caught up in the melting world. The sole clue was the places where the world was most vivid. I finally caught up at stairwell where I heard the echoes of someone skipping two steps at a time. This whole floor looked ready to dissolve, so I had no choice but to follow him upward.

From the stairwell, I could see the outside world, well, what little of I could see. The surroundings were covered with a thin layer of snow, and the sky hung clouded with a layer of grey. A few other multistory buildings loomed above the snow, but there was also a distinct lack of continuous earth. Some of those other buildings floated on islands of rocks suspended above that very same white abyss. That sight had been so surreal that it stopped me in my tracks. I remembered myself when the stairwell behind me began to vanish. It jolted me when my one hand on the handrail stopped me from falling backward into that infinite space which ate the stairwell to the step below me.

I followed the echoes of the other me to the top floor. At last the advantage of all that traveling proved advantageous because the stamina of the other me had been sapped. It was a little embarrassing to see me so tuckered out, but perhaps I could attribute my own well being to my current form being ethereal. The other me finally reached his destination at a secluded corner of the top floor. A door stood in the way, and he waited outside it catching his breath. I appeared hesitant to enter. That I didn't remember any of this drove me nuts; the man with hands on his knees and sweating up a storm couldn't be anyone else but me, yet I felt as though I watched someone else's life unfold. Were these memories locked in my subconscious, my imagination... or someone else's?

My time to dwell on scary thoughts such as those were cut short when he finally turned the handle and crossed the threshold. I followed closely behind, and the inside had as much color, form and solidity as real life. It was a lab. Computers lined a series of desks, white boards covered three walls. A dozen overclocked computers sputtered as their HDDs and CPUs were strained. A distinct sound of nearly burning silicon drifted out from the room. They fluttered between graphs and lines of code and raw data crunched and spat out an endless stream of numbers. Filled to the brim, with barely a spot of white remaining, were the boards covered in black felt ink. A labyrinthine mess of calculations and formulae covered it.

I watched the eyes of the other me dart from left to right as if looking not for something but someone. No one stood inside the room

except for one other person; the apathetic sigh of relief seemed to me like he was happy to not find him or her. I slipped in while the other me closed the door behind me.

“Excuse me,” he called out.

I took another look, and the back of the person currently filling up the last corner of the whiteboard did not turn around. Given the shape and size, it was a woman. A head of platinum blonde hair, thin limbs and petite frame. A white lab coat clung to her with a pair of tight khaki pants wrapped around her legs. The woman wasn't short by any means, but she still had to stand on the tips of her toes and stretch her arm out to fill in the last corner. It didn't occur that it could be solved by finding a chair or stool. The woman was far too engrossed with her work for that.

The other me called out again, a little less patiently, “Excuse me?”

The head of the woman twitched. Whatever spell had a grip on her had broken, and she turned to face the two of us. My initial thought of 'woman' had been misplaced, the face I saw looked young enough to qualify as 'girl'. This girl looked barely out of high-school. Her face was a mess. There were bags under her eyes which failed to be hidden by the pair of thick rim glasses. Greasy unwashed skin protested by breaking out in a couple of red pimples. Not a spot of makeup or care was present on this girl... All except for her hair. A long thick braid draped over her shoulder. It hung down to her navel, but on closer inspection, the ends were frayed.

The other me reeled on his heels. An intense pair of brown eyes scrutinized me. A sudden nervousness that shook him caused me to reconsider another thing; the girl's hygiene may be a mess, but she was far from ugly. Perhaps I had merely grown accustomed to more and dulled to less. For a natural born human girl, her features were feminine, symmetrical and appealing. Had she cared to take care of herself more, I may have to worry for this other self of mine caught like a deer in headlights in front of her.

“H-has Professor Richard swung by yet?” He asked.

“Who?” the girl's response was quick and pointed.

“Dr. Richard... He shares this room with Professor Mikkel...” He replied, sounding slightly unsure.

“Hmm,” the girl pulled her eyes away and thought. “No. Just me until you arrived.

I watched as the other me's shoulders drop as if a great weight rolled off them.

“Thank fucking Christ,” he said.

He then marched over to a small side preparation room and dropped the red binder triumphantly into an empty IN bin. He emerged from the room, the girl watching him closely, and he stretched and finally a smile returned to his face. I tried to steal quick glance at the cover of the binder, but of course the letters there were a jumbled mess. His name, my name, should be there... Figures.

The girl pulled herself away from the whiteboard and got right into his space. By the time he opened his eyes after that long stretch, the fact that she was so close freaked him out. She may as well have teleported with how quiet her footsteps were. Yet she didn't react with panic when the man before her flipped out and nearly fell over backward. Rather, the girl didn't get the message and stepped forward into his personal space again. But this time the other me didn't have anywhere else to go when the back of his legs ran into a desk.

The girl tilted her head as if she were a cat curiously inspecting something. I felt a pang of sympathy embarrassment for myself and this situation looked so awkward I was a little happy I didn't remember it. Her large brown eyes stared up at him, and his blue eyes looked back down at her. She knit her eyebrows together, deep in thought, and after what felt like a minute they shot back open. A strange smile spread across her face and she took a few steps backward, finally allowing me to pull away from the table behind him.

He was a little freaked out, but mostly curious when he asked, “Do I... Know you?”

Bang

The smile on the girl's face straightened. What color there was to her pale white and pasty skin drained. Her eyes shot wide open with surprise at first, quickly moistening before hardening with resolve. It all happened so quickly that I could not fault the other me in not reacting to it. For all the dangers I've had to deal with my senses had become sensitive to these subtle changes. Noticing these things have become a matter of life and death the last few months. A subdued smile quickly replaced the emptiness between the glowing previous one.

“Yes...” she replied.

Social graces were not this girl's forte. The tone and inflection in her voice was not lost on either me or the other me. There was something odd about it.

“...Laven,” she said, clear as day.

The other me did not react aside from shaking his head after hearing something odd and inconsequential. Meanwhile, my heart stopped.

The world stopped. That abyss quickly melted the walls, and the two figures before me melted into mist and dissipated into the ether. I had not finished gasping a rush before the floor gave way. My body fell through empty space into the darkness which quickly climbed up the infinite walls of white. The distant shining white light of that infinite world became a spec, a distant star before being consumed by the rushing darkness of claustrophobic finite space.

I had not the time, will or ability to scream.

***

Laven

A voice called out to me. I opened my eyes and saw the real world. I felt a soft bed at my back and the stone walls of the room I last remembered falling asleep in. My body leaped up from the bed, and I sat upright, sweating, breathing heavily and quickly. A sensation of falling still wracked my nerves. Why was I falling? I didn't know, I couldn't remember.

Laven

The voice called out to me again. It sounded as thought it came from behind the door, yet felt impossibly far away. I remembered one thing; someone had called out to me. That's why I had woken up... Right?

I looked to my left and right and saw Rose and Minte curled up in the bed beside me... Rather, Minte curled up on my left and Rose sprawled out in a slovenly and unladylike manner to my right. Naked, on top of the covers and snoring a bit with her mouth wide open. But if someone was making a noise, even that quiet, why would Minte be

sleeping so soundly beside me? Her hearing was at least two orders of magnitude better than my own, yet she slept soundlessly without so much as budging beyond her chest expanding and contracting with each little breath.

Laven

It called out again. I grabbed Rose by the shoulder and shook her.

“Rose, wake up!” I hissed through my teeth.

Her open snoring mouth closed up and hummed delightfully. She turned over in her sleep while mumbling something about food. I turned over to Minte and shook her the same way. She moaned, stretched a bit and then curled up even further like a pill bug. That's not right, I thought. And it certainly wasn't. Because a chill fog billowed over the floor. It wasn't high enough to reach the window, so it couldn't be from outside where I had seen it across the garden before. The only place it could enter from was underneath the door. I leaped out of the bed and turned back to the two sleeping girls.

“Come on! Wake up!” I shouted this time.

I grabbed hold of the blanket and tried to yank it off, but two dead weights on it proved too much to budge it. They didn't react either. I rushed over and gently opened up Rose's right eye.

Out cold. No reaction. She was gone and the same is true for Minte. Even the large insectoid compound eyes on top of her head refused to budge. I dared to caress and fondle her antennae. That should have gotten a reaction, but I got nothing instead.

Laven

The voice called out again. This time, however, the door to the room opened slowly on its own. A gentle creak caused the hairs on my arms to stand up and a chill to run down my spine. Neither Rose nor Minte were going to wake up. I ran over to my clothes heaped on the floor and searched the pockets for that golden ankh... And found nothing.

“That's... Impossible,” I muttered, lips trembling.

There wasn't anything I could do. And that voice kept calling for me. That same voice which had to be responsible for this. A voice

which had already passed this way and remained unseen and unheard until now, a thief in the night. A sense of duty, a need to protect the two girls and my own curiosity led me to dressing myself and stepping out into the hallway.

The rolling fog bank spread out in every direction. The fog rolled out-of-the-way a bit wherever I walked, but remained constant and always returned to the way it had been before. I stood there afraid, confused and on guard until a path through the fog opened on its own.

Come

The voice implored me to follow it. My heart heat inside my throat, but I had no other choice. This voice was responsible, and it held hostages. I complied and walked along the open path through the fog. I tread carefully down the empty hallways, coated with the witching hour twilight.

My boots stopped when I encountered the first living souls. Two guards standing at the entrance to another bedroom. They were motionless, their faces hidden behind barbute helmets. I wasn't sure how much help they'd be, but we were still guests, technically, so they weren't going to strike me down for merely approaching.

And they wouldn't because they were asleep. Their bodies were locked and standing tall, but their heads were slumped over, their eyes were closed and their breathing was shallow and rhythmic. This ain't no normal falling asleep on the job; this had to be the work of magic. The billowing fog had to be part of it; either as a conduit or side effect.

Laven

The voice called out from behind. It called me away from the room. I had no reason to babysit the guards or try to rouse them from their own personal sleeping beauty fairy tale, so I followed the mysterious voice.

Everywhere in the manor I wandered, the story remained the same. The light of the stars and moon through the window lit the world, and the path through the fog and the call of that voice guided me. It led me through the winding hallways and down the floors till I reached the garden I had watched over before. Except now the guards patrolling it were gone. And at its center, waiting under a gazebo stranded amongst the floral beds, was a lone solitary figure.

A waspish thin woman wearing a black cocktail dress which clung to every sensual curve waited in the fog. And that fog billowed off her. It did not flow around her; no, it came from her finger tips and from under that dress of hers. I approached quietly, but her head turned toward me. Long and wavy locks of nearly white hair danced in the night air which gave way to her warm smile. Yet her eyes felt cold, like the sapphires they appeared to be, and they stabbed through my chest like icicles.

She curtsied low and greeted me, “Welcome, Laven.”

I stepped closer, slowly. My suspicion was thicker than the fog surrounding our feet. Gold flashed in the palm of her hand, and she tossed something through the air toward me. I wasn't nearly on guard enough because my instinct caused me to catch it instead of evading it. From the air, I snatched the other gold ankh Susan and Ba'el had prepared for us.

“Call them now or soon, if you feel it is necessary,” she then said with a distinct smile: “But... I already know that you won't.”

I rolled the ankh in the palm of my hand and through my fingers. There didn't appear to be any alterations to it. My mind was more preoccupied with how she managed to get her hands on it though. But now that it was back in my possession, all it would take is to smash it into the ground and the other three girls would come running... Yet I did not feel compelled to do so. This woman was the same from the party before. I still remembered what she had said. However, I could not stop myself from asking the most obvious question:

“Who the hell are you?”

“Hyria, of course... I apologize. Did I not introduce myself properly before?” She said, raising a coquettish hand to her cheek to feign concern.

“That's not what I meant,” I snapped back.

A smug expression crept across her face.

“I am of old blood. Blood blessed to tap into the astral weaves,” she replied.

“Magic. That much is obvious. Why the hell would you pull the sorceress stunt like this?”

“It was preordained as such. The two of us meeting like this. Here, in the fog... No one to interrupt us. No one to overhear what is to be discussed.”

Her voice, which had been the one calling me from before, is now barely loud enough to hear, and I had to get even closer.

“And so you put the whole manor to sleep?”

“Most of the manor already slumbers. This spell merely makes sure that the others do as well.”

“So you can lure me out here. All by myself and vulnerable?”

“Talowasi's Reprieve,” Hyria explained. “Formulated long ago. Used by those besieged to strictly enforce ceasefires; providing all with a much needed slumber. The rain of arrows, the slinging of stones and boulders, the threat of soldiers sneaking in during the night and seizing them by throat with steely knives... All worries that are banished because it is impossible while the specter of sleep is so strong it weighs down the eyes all.”

“Convenient,” I said, still eying her suspiciously.

“—As a test for you as well,” Hyria fired back. “I am now convinced I did not see wrong. You are capable of fulfilling my request.”

“What are you—?”

“If you were not, you would still be sleeping.”

The chilling feeling of realization passed through me; her words passing through me. In her lace gloved hand, she held a pendent suspended by a golden chain around her neck which housed a broken sapphire gem.

“Yes, that's correct. You too should slumber... On that bed with your two companions... Yet, you are awake well before the spell's effect should lift... Two hours from now.”

“...You said you had a job... What is it?” I asked.

Hyria smiled warmly. The smug satisfaction that everything adhered to her predictions, to her plan, rubbed me the wrong way. I felt a distinct sensation of being used, and I didn't like it.

“Do you know much of Yaleria?” She asked.

“No one handed me a travel brochure on the way in, so not much.”

Either my pointed words passed right over her head, or Hyria simply brushed them aside and so she continued:

“Upheaval and change in these lands now called The Empire were but another facet of life so long ago. The Imperial Crown, the Church of the Almighty, all the lords and ladies of the grand and noble houses of this age, they all forget the past. But not Yaleria... Yaleria reveres the past... It's past. And I seek to pay long overdue respects to family and friend long since past.”

Hyria produced an emerald green crystal from a purse. It shone in the nightlight, but eerily so. No... It had to be producing its own light. A radiative green aura. I felt a sense of danger at the sight of it. She held it out to me, goading me closer to retrieve it from her hands.

“It is harmless,” she assured me.

The sincere tone in her voice and gentle expression didn't appear to hide and malice and I could not sense any deceit... Nor a need for deceit. The thing did appear to be crystalline and made of emerald. But the way it glowed reminded me of kryptonite. Except... it was the size of a glow-stick. You could sell a fifty carat fine cut emerald for millions of dollars; this thing, if it really was a cylindrical gemstone, had to be worth hundreds of millions. And she handed it to me.

Intrigue, curiosity, greed— All of those emotions led to me sticking my hand out to accept it. A browned paper scroll was tried around the end of it, which had previously been hidden in Hyria's palm.

“It is an heirloom. Long separated from my family's mausoleum... Buried deep beneath Yaleria's catacombs. I want you to do what I cannot. Return it to its proper resting place.”

I asked the most obvious question first, “What's stopping you from doing it yourself?”

“Those catacombs are dangerous. Lethal. Protected against grave robbers. Traps long fallen to disrepair, unpredictable and many forgotten... You may not believe me given all the troubles you have

endured, and will endure, but magic is not just a tool of war and destruction. I am not a warrior. I cannot brave those depths, nor do I know of another to deliver is safely."

"And what makes you think we can do it?"

"I don't think; I know you will succeed. I have seen it."

This woman who thought herself a fortune teller didn't sell her point well at all. She had convinced herself, but the thought she had to convince anyone else with more than her word eluded her. But talk of danger also put me on edge.

"And what makes you think we can succeed?"

"All the bodies, minds and spirit you require lay ready at your finger tips. You merely need to reach out and seize it."

"And trust? This looks like it could sell for a fortune. What's to stop me from selling it for far more than you're going to pay me?"

"Because you won't."

She was sure of a lot of things she shouldn't be.

"Maybe I will, if only to prove you wrong...."

Hyria retrieved a small sack, large enough to fit in the palm of her hand. She held it out with her other hand toward me. I took it off her and felt the weight and heard the sound of metal. Inside were two pieces of unmarked golden disks, the shape and size of coins. In addition to those there were five silvers coins of the same size, shape and lack of markings. If these were pure silver and gold... It could feed the five of us, to stomach's bursting, for a month. And there would still be more than enough to kit ourselves. We wouldn't need to continue holding everything we had together with proverbial duct tape.

"You could. But you will never find a buyer who will pay its true worth... Not here, not within a thousand leagues as the raven flies. Follow the map, brave the dangers of Yaleria's past and return that gem to its intended pedestal, and I will grant upon you all the silver and gold you need to reach your intended destination."

It was compelling, but I still had to shake my head. Something still felt off.

"This is all very— I mean it's what we need—but..."

"Laven," Hyria sighed disappointing, "You've spent so much time in company such as yours, but you've gained little tact. You should not pry too deeply into the affairs of a fine maiden. Her charm goes only so far as her mystery."

She smiled once more, another cryptic, oddly beautiful and refined smile.

"Now... Have we come to terms?"

Chapter 90

“And I thought the Kneljewl swamps were rough,” I said while pulling a boot out from a vacuum seal of muck.

A sickening pop preceded my next (more cautious) step. The lands within Yaleria proper were far removed from green hills and red rock mountains we passed through two nights before. All those sweet scents such as budding grape flowers were a distant memory. A reality cruelly overwritten by the smell of rotted plants and mud. Off the paved stone highways were these dirt roads that turned to mud after the rains came. It was a mystery to me how nature had yet to reclaim these strips of dirt through the wetlands. Reeds and waterlogged trees grew thick, but they respected the man-made structures and left these dirt dykes unmolested. It's a good thing too because without them, I imagine that the pools of still water would probably end up chaotic and roil in every direction which would make travel impossible this deep in the Yalerian wilderness.

One small comfort is that it's still too early for mosquito season. Most of the little buggers were no doubt lying in wait as larva, biding their time till mid summer to unleash misery upon the world. A quick slap against my neck every so often would be enough to keep myself from being eaten alive.

“If it troubles you so... I could carry you through like before,” Chris called down from up above.

The wyvern perched high up in a tree and wedged herself between a point halfway up where the trunk split in two. Her talons cut gashes into the bark and trees creaked and began to bend under her weight. She looked down at me, slogging through the mud, skin covered in mud and mosquito blood. I looked back at the other girls who were also covered in muck up to their thighs.

Shoshanah had muck all over her. The anubis' bronze tan couldn't hide what looked like a haphazardly applied mud mask. I'm sure the cosmetic benefits of it were being counteracted by the way her brow furrowed. Her golden staff did not serve the best walking stick either, and despite how careful she is, her paws routinely sunk into the road, plunging her fur covered calves into the muck and nearly throwing her off balance which would lead her to face plant into the mud. The rest of her fur had long since caked with dry mud. Her stomach, once smooth, was a canvas of rough dried mud that concealed her signature tattoos.

Even Minte had gotten soaked and covered in mud at some point. However, she looked nowhere near as bad as Susan. The assassin's stoic expression didn't let on if she were as miserable or upset. Rose, on the other hand, looked just as messed up as Susan, but what alarmed me was to see her signature smile absent. I expected this little foray into the wilderness to make her ecstatic. But for the past couple days she kept quiet and cared not to look back at me. If I were not seeing things, she went so far as to look away and give a little pout when doing so. The other girls either didn't notice, or the novelty of the peace and quiet this caused had not yet worn off.

“No, I'm good,” I declared.

“Don't be so modest, Laven,” Ba'el said with a happy-go-lucky chime. “Don't be so lame while trying to look cool.”

So said the one girl who had yet to get so much as a spec of mud on her. She pranced along the road, from one stray stone in the road to the next. Not once had I'd seen her sink a hoof up to the knees in the mud. It didn't take her much effort, but the little girl put in some effort to stay completely dry and unsullied by the mud. This of course was not lost on the other girls.

“As expected of the goat,” Shoshanah said with dagger in her words.

“Ha ha,” She laughed, “Maybe that'd get a rise out of me while you looked like anything but that.”

The baphomet skipped merrily down the road. Shoshanah's goat comparison was not far off at all. It could be because she's that much lighter than everyone else here, or maybe it's a natural talent in those legs of hers. Ba'el pranced as gracefully as a goat high up in the mountains where one misstep could spell certain death. The girly singing of old folk songs grated on the anubis' nerves even more. For my own health, I decided against pushing the goat comparison myself. I learned there were two buttons with that girl: Don't treat her like a child and remember that she's a demon, not a—

“Dark Beast, Laven,” Ba'el said, stopping mid step on a single hoof and pirouetting toward me.

“Erk,” my voice croaked and died in my throat

I didn't say all that out loud, did I?

She shook her butt in my direction (what she did have at least) which was hidden behind her green cape. Yet still it clung to it due to there being not much at covering it to begin with.

“I know you like to watch when I walk in front,” she said, laying the sultry on little too thick, “But you should remember it's the spade tail that gives a demon her pride. For a hell beast like me, it's all in the horns.”

Curved backward, sharp, but also sporting one which had broken. She pampered and padded them with the palm of her paw like some patrician bunching up the curls in her hair. The movements of her paws suggested thickness, curl and size mattered. Her goat tail swished back and forth merrily and peeked out from each corner of the cape as she glowed radiantly with pride.

“Ohhhh~” Chris awed from above. “Is that why they're so big while nothing else is?”

Her words carried no malice, I think, they certainly sounded sincere... I could never tell with that girl. Chris' naivety touched a nerve though; Ba'el haughty expression twisted into an ugly grimace. A crack in her armor of contempt which then got obliterated by a snort from Susan who wore a smug expression on her mud covered face.

Ba'el kicked the tree next to her. The bark splintered and the trunk cracked. A whole mature tree got severed at the base of the trunk from one single kick. Chris was not troubled though, a few flaps of her wings and a leap forward carried her into the next tree where she perched in safety as the twenty odd meter tree collapsed into the soggy swamp.

“Say that again down here, why dontcha? I'll slap those tumours of yours so hard they'll spin right 'round and grow outta your back!”

And Ba'el's chipper attitude had been cut out from under her. Chris' lungs bellowed out another hearty laugh as she moved not so gracefully in the canopy above. The rain of leaves and twigs onto Ba'el's head exasperated her frustration as she chased after the wyvern from below.

Leaving the daemon behind to swallow her anger, the wyvern beat her wings and leaped into the air. She crawled her way up through the canopy and broke free into the skies above. I envied the

girl, I really did, but it wouldn't be fair for me to cling onto her back while the other four—three were drudging through the mire. I'm the one who got us into this mess, and I wasn't about to avoid paying the bare minimum price of admission.

"Laven, thou shouldst suffer from imagined obligations," Susan declared, tired.

"No way," I refused immediately. "What good what that do besides soften me up?"

Susan offered no rebuttal. I'd be abusing both trust and their kindness by making a single day a little easier on me. That would be a bad trade and an unfair one. Immoral even. I'd stick to my guns and commit myself to going through the same drudgery as the others. Anything less would be unacceptable. Besides, there were a few questions I had to get off my chest. First, about something Ba'el had said. I looked forward and watched her while she preoccupied herself failing to catch up with the girl who could fly. She'd be out of earshot right about now.

I turned back to Susan and had to ask, "Isn't she a demon?"

That was my understanding when we first met in that cave back in the North Marches.

"A creature sired by the pits of hell," she replied. "Semantics, to be sure, but technically a creature such as her is not like that of succubi which I read now dominate the hells."

"...But still bound by the same rules?" I muttered.

If I could catch her in the right mood, the one where she wasn't hitting on me or messing around, I'd have to have her flat out explain it all. To be honest there were questions about Susan's origins and home I wanted to ask too. But these things felt incredibly private. Topics that were too sensitive to bring up in polite conversation and mix them casually with small talk. It felt wrong to simply bring them up with the others around the camp fire in the evening.

While looking past Susan, I caught Rose staring at me, but once again she quickly diverted her eyes. Her tail sparked and sputtered a few embers for a second, but then died back down to tepid levels. Her tail made it all but impossible for her to hide her emotions, but I still wasn't sure which emotion she inadvertently displayed. The only sound she made besides that was a rude humph. It had gotten

worse, so I slowed down till I walked beside Susan and could whisper directly into her ear.

“Is something wrong with Rose? She's been acting weird ever since we set off.”

I got an incredulous look in return. A cocked eyebrow which forced anyone who looking to reconsider if they were current sober, or weren't missing a few braincells from a moment ago. You need to seriously think on what you just said, and why you said it. That's what that single expression from Susan said, and she left it at that. Her attention returned to navigating the muddy road.

She passed by while I stood there dumbfounded by the cold shoulder. Normally she'd not hesitate to answer, but apparently this was something I had to do myself. I scratched the back of my head while Rose passed me by next. A thick tension hung in the air which felt thick enough to lite off a couple sparks. A force which felt near gravitation in nature caused my hand to twitch and reach out for her, but I held myself back while she walked past.

Something hung in the back of my mind, but I couldn't give it form or put it into words. This wasn't exactly the best place to be doing this though. We had limited daylight hours left and camping here would be as miserable as it'd be disastrous. So when Minte passed by, I stopped her and asked the same thing. I didn't expect much out of the quiet girl, but anything would be something at this point.

Minte's blank expression heaved an almost unnoticeable sigh, but compared to her usual self, I picked up on it without fail. But even her eyes spoke to me: Really? That's the one word, in an accusatory tone, I got from those indigo eyes of hers. And she isn't about to let me stand in the middle of the road either as she put her hands on my back and started pushing me forward. Rear guard duty fell onto her and she so there would be no way tolerating my standing around in a daze by all by myself.

“I can see the clearing!” Chris bellowed from above. “At the end of the next bend in the road. Through the swamp one-third a league north, our destination awaits!”

Well, mulling over all that could wait. Hearing that our destination neared had been a breath of fresh air to our tired convoy of misery. That should mean some dry and flat ground to rest on before starting the next leg of our journey. Letting my feet dry and my back to

stretch out on the floor... the thought of those alone caused a warm soothing feeling to wash over me. A taste of the reward my body had prepared for itself after a laborious day.

Chris is the fortunate one; due to an unfortunate series of events after reaching these nearly forgotten backroads. Yaleria was indeed spotted by swamps, wetlands, marshes, whatever you want to call them— But a lot of it were rather cleverly and impressively converted into farmland. A few levies and dykes here and there, and you found yourself with several dozens of acres worth of freely irrigated black peat soil. That's why the sudden decay of good infrastructure hit us so suddenly. Chris sank down all the way to her chest when a soggy section of dirt road gave way like quick sand. If it were not for her massive chest, the girl may have gone down to her chin or worse.

This happened about three times before we all agreed she should take to the skies and act as our eyes. It took two more times of her sinking into the muck before she finally agreed. The girl felt as though she were missing something if she left us down below. I could never leave my comrades to toil alone! She declared... But in truth everyone was getting tired of stopping every ten or twenty minutes to pull her loose from the mud. The girl must weigh more than a hundred kilos thanks to her height, tail, wings... chest... and all those armoured scales. She wasn't built for off-roading, and she'd have to accept that. Especially after the third time, when Ba'el, with all her strength, threw up her arms in anger and refused to be the one to pull her out of the muck one more time.

One small comfort now, after half a day in this mess, would be that the entrance to our destination is now close at hand. We'd leave this muck behind, wash ourselves off, and we could finally get to work... But only after wading through the waist deep sludge. It took another half-hour, a few more legs sinking into the mud and the swamp coming up to our chests. I'm positive an army of leeches were tripping over themselves to latch on wherever they could as well.

Minte moved up the to front and started slashing through the foliage with her arm blades and make quick work out of the brambles blocking our path. Chris circled up above and kept an eye on us and made sure we didn't stray off target while cutting through the wilderness. Ba'el, still refusing to get dirty, jumped from one tree trunk to another directly over our head. At least we managed to convince her to carry most of our belongings. She lugged several packs strapped to her in all places, altogether they would be twice her size, but that didn't

slow the girl down at all, nor make finding her footing with those hooves of hers any more difficult. Rose, Susan and I stuck close with me in the middle. The anubis' held her staff above her head and let it glow with a guiding light since much of it was being blocked by the thick forest canopy. Rose held her sword above her head

I let my mind wander in a vain attempt to escape depressing reality. My train of thought drifted back to the words of that mysterious sorceress.

“With this artifact, I proclaim you active priest of Dulimder; Be his ward, he himself who walks the world and among the living in his stead. Take it to the depths of my family's ancient tomb and set it upon the alter. That one should assuage many missed generations of homage and ease those spirits which have no doubt grown restless.”

That is what I recall Hyria telling me two nights ago. Even now the green glowing crystal rested in my front jean pocket. It wasn't much smaller than a rely baton, but definitely looked like one giant emerald. It shone with an inner light, but the cut and grind of the clear crystal no doubt made it an unbelievably precious gemstone. Susan and Ba'el both agreed that it could not be a naturally occurring stone. Due to its size and shape, the thing had to have been created using magic.

What this green artifact could be was beyond everyone besides Shoshanah and Ba'el. But the definitive thing that could be deduced between the two of them is that it's magic in nature and that no natural process within the earth over many eons could by chance produce it. A series of ridges and notches gave no other impression but that of a key. To set it upon the alter had a whole other meaning with that in mind. That's what the two of them figured out by looking at it. When they wanted to take it into their own hands I had to stop them.

I explained to them that our client specifically mentioned that only I could carry it and that handing it off to anyone else would make the whole ritual null and void. Shoshanah objected at first, but she got real strange when I mentioned the bit about being some Death God's representative. Her thoughts got all tangled up on that. She twirled a lock of her black hair around a claw while her cheeks flushed red. Then she spent the next twenty minutes muttering to herself. Ba'el narrowed her eyes and looked at me suspiciously; but in the end, she shrugged her shoulders and stated, “well, we'll just have to wait and see.”

Something about the way she had answered rubbed me the

wrong way. But Ba'el assured me that if she remembered anything important that she'd bring it up immediately. I'm positive that suspicion had to do with the aura of mystery that surrounded the woman who was our client. Rose and Minte had been the only other two to see her, but hadn't spoken to her directly, or alone, so the others had to take my word on the matter. They were all rather alarmed that the two of us had met in person, alone, that night.

Shoshanah could not rationalize her intentions and reasoning based on her actions while Ba'el made passing insults about 'coward's' magic. Putting the whole manor to sleep, the baphomet assured me, had been quite a feat, but such an indiscriminate spell had no utility besides mercy. It didn't win battles, it could prolong them, but there wasn't always a benefit to that. Unless reinforcements were on their way. During a siege though... You'd expect them to have arrived considering how long a good set of walls should last. A good night's sleep to help with the last stand, that's the one situation that spell would be good for. A sphere of sleep magic that would render any attacker moot by lulling him to instant slumber upon breaching the perimeter. “Made selfishly by some soft insomniac wizard on the eve of his slaughter. When he got taken out with the rest of his fortress the following day,” Ba'el had said.

I got the impression that my not being affected by the spell was part of some test. Hyria would vanish into the night and never be seen again had I not answered her summons. That is the way I saw it. It took some explaining before the suspicious Susan and Ba'el relented and came to the same conclusion. But even Ba'el had a hard time believing I could have woken up during that spell. Hours had passed since I passed out after... well... after a rough start to the night... but I did wake up as suddenly as I had fallen asleep. A spell that lulled the energetic Rose and attentive Minte to a sleep so deep I couldn't shake them out of it.

At last we were rewarded when the thick foliage gave way to the clearing Chris mentioned before. We stepped out from the swamp and stood before an enormous mausoleum. Its size may have been mistaken for a temple, but how it was described to me meant it could never have been a place of worship. It had been a place of mourning and paying respects. But all the moss and cracks covering the stone structure told me it had not been used, repaired or visited for a long time.

We made better time through the swamp than I could have ever hoped for. There were still a few hours or daylight left. My first course

of action would be to shake off my soaked boots and fall face first on the dry grass. A fire is needed, stat. A couple more days of this and I'd begin to rot with trench foot. Everyone else appeared to have the same idea too, and they all collapsed onto the grass in a series of thuds. A warm wash of accomplishment overtook me and banished the cold dampness and string of fresh mosquito bites. I gave out a weak laughter and it ended up being infectious as the others began to chuckle as well.

Ten minutes were put aside to lay there and do nothing. The occasional dragonfly buzzing nearby and the sing song of birds were the only sounds to be heard. There wasn't any need to agree upon the moment of silence and rest, everyone knew instinctively to not violate the sanctity of it. That would be until I sat back up and it was time to get back to business.

“Are we going to camp here tonight and then enter in the morning?” I asked.

“Sleep in the middle of the swamp?” Ba'el answered incredulously. “With all these insects around and in this humidity? I don't think so.”

“This ground here, as dry as it is, shall no doubt flood with the evening and morning dew,” Susan declared. “Without a solid and prepared floor, such an action would be highly inadvisable.”

“Still, we can't sit around here soaking wet. We need time to dry off and prepare.”

“And be inside before dark,” Ba'el added. “Don't you think there's a reason why no one lives around here? And I'm talking about things besides the smell of shit.”

A clatter of sticks haphazardly dropped on the ground along with some stones kicked into place. Chris used her talons to scrap the ground and dig out a pit with all the grace and efficiency of a backhoe. Without a word of warning she puffed out her chest and breathed a stream of fire onto the coddled mess of a hastily made campfire and it roared to life in an instant. The girl of action looked up, a smile on her face, and gave me a thumbs up with a claw on her forearm.

“Step one, completed!” the wyvern declared.

And with that we had the all important fire prepared. We scattered our belongings and half set-up a temporary camp. I changed

into a dryer (and clean) set of clothes. I also put my steel gauntlets and iron tipped boots back on. There would no telling how much trouble could be beyond that door, or in the middle of the wilderness. Neither did we have to worry about rusting or sinking into the ground like before either. The girls shook themselves off, wiped the dirt off their bodies, shone their scales back to a shine and wrung the muck out from their hair and fur.

Susan took control of the fire to prepare a much needed meal. Some sort of stew carefully and exactly prepared with absolute and planned measurements. Minte and Chris worked together to start drying off all our belongings which had been soaked during our foray into the swamp. Minte held out a piece of clothing on the end of one of her arm blades while Chris blew extremely hot air at it. I feared that she'd spurt out a little flame and light something on fire, but they seemed to be in control. Meanwhile, Ba'el stood by the front of the mausoleum. Rose sat at the edge of the grass clearing, dangling her legs off the edge.

It was very much unlike Rose. I couldn't get anything out of Susan or Minte, and Chris was busy, so I took my chances with Ba'el this time. I approached from behind as she traced her paws over the engravings chiseled into the stone.

“What's the story here?”

“Nothing,” she replied with a dry monotone voice.

“What do you mean nothing?”

“I mean nothing, nothing. Half the engravings have eroded away. You look here and here,” She said while pointing to a couple lines framing the whole of what she spent the last five minutes looking at. “This is a door, for sure. But I don't see any lock or mechanism.”

She turned and looked up at me with an exasperated expression on her face.

“Well how about—“

I tried to suggest, but Ba'el thrust her paw folded into a fist toward the stone wall. A loud crack echoed throughout the swamp. My whole body jerked and had my nerves been a little shakier than they were, I would have leaped far enough back to land myself back into the swamp. And the door didn't give way.

Not one bit.

Ba'el straight lips curled slowly into a frown and her out stretched arm trembled. Her legs gave way and she squatted on the ground, clutching her right paw into her chest.

“You alright?”

“PERFECTLY... calm,” the girl reassured me, unconvincingly.

“What do you think you are doing?” came Susan's voice from the campfire.

The anubis stood up and glared at Ba'el's back and then turned her accusing eyes to me. I shook my head and pointed fingers down toward the daemon.

“Did you just try to break down the door?”

“Yes, I just tried to beak down the damn door!” Ba'el yelled back.

Susan wouldn't be close enough to see, but there were a couple of tears welling up in her eyes.

“This is a holy site!”

“This is shitty site, in the middle of fucking nowhere! Besides, it's not one of your holy sites, so lay off it... You mind the damn dinner!” Ba'el screeched as she stood back up and pointed her unharmed left claw back at Susan.

The priestess had a mean look in her eye, but decided against escalating the situation into a full-blown fight. Ba'el hadn't done any visible damage to the structure, and rather hurt herself, so Susan backed away. She'd no doubt check in later when she had finished preparing that stew for everyone. Her knowledge must have some specialization in tombs and the like, but Ba'el held an edge in matters concerning magic. And this was from a culture, history and religion she's not familiar with in the first place. If the goat, as she'd say, wasn't going to have any luck then Susan could provide a second opinion. It would be very unlikely she'd have the answer right away if the baphomet did not.

“Can we not resort to brute force in less than ten minutes for

once?" I suggested.

"Brute force is exactly what you do when you come across something without a lock. Especially when there isn't an opening either," she said, turning her eyes back up at me. "Whoever built this did not intend for anyone to get in."

After a minute, Ba'el could flex her right hand along with moving all its fuzzy digits. She immediately went back to tapping the stone with the claw tips, tracing for some sort of missed opening or important etching she had missed.

"If you're gonna stand there and watch like an idiot, go and do something that's actually useful... Like cheering up the firebrand back there," Ba'el said.

At least this time I didn't have to awkwardly bring it up.

"And what's with that? I haven't seen her that mopey since she tried pretending to be a professional mercenary for once," I said, remembering when we first walked together into proper civilization for the first time.

Ba'el turned her head up to look at me and she wore the exact same expression Susan and Minte had. It said: 'Really?' I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders as if to reply: 'Yes, really!'

"You think about that for a minute," Ba'el clicked her tongue and then turned her attention back to the wall.

That was the last I'd get out of her for now. Her expression advertised it. I gave up and stepped away, setting my sights on the red hair girl sitting far beyond the edge of the camp. Her tail rested lazily on the grass, her red ponytail hanging down her exposed back. Each footstep I planned carefully and approached with caution.

"Hey there," I called out to her.

Her tail came to life and lifted off the ground, but she slowly set it back down on the opposite side of her. It spurt to life for a second, but slowly died back down to a static and mellow low burning point.

I crouched down, wiped off the grass beside her and sat down. She responded by crossing her leg closest to me over her other and looked away. Rose rested her chin on her right fist. I still couldn't tell what expression she made. And that left us at an impasse. We sat

there without saying anything. She's upset and had nothing to say to me. I wasn't sure where to start or why she's mad in the first place.

Sitting in close proximity did get my heart rate to increase and the blood flow to my brain to kick into overdrive. My confusion metamorphosed into distress as the lack of a simple answer left me distraught. It couldn't be something that complex. I had to be over thinking something. Rose didn't let herself get hung up on small and petty details. She had also been all over before we had set out. It was at some point after we left the manor, after meeting back up with the others and debriefing on the night before, that I noticed this change in attitude.

I thought further and further back. Rose in that dress of hers... twirling a dagger in the air. Great, now I couldn't separate those two images. The novelty of Rose dressed like a princess had been polluted by something far more natural and organic. I wracked my brain further and further, daring to delve through other memories, such as Rose laying peacefully asleep in that bed while I got up to...

By myself.

Ah. Of course. That'd probably it. Rose and I had gone it alone, but she did feel obligated to protect me. That's how it was, wasn't it? Had I put myself in danger and left her behind? No. I'm the one trying to protect her because she'd been sleeping peacefully and defenceless... Except for the bit she wouldn't be harmed since no one else was awake but me and... Ack. I held my throbbing head in my hands and groaned. Of course she was mad. But how do I explain all that, and explain myself?

No. An explanation probably wasn't what a girl like her would want to hear. At least that's what I think. That's what I've learned so far about her... If I'm not mistaken... Either way, I stood back up without a word. Rose's tail twitched again, her body shook and she readjusted herself on that perch of hers awkwardly. I took a few steps back toward the camp while watching her and saw her shoulders sag as she exhaled dejectedly.

“Hey,” I called back to her.

Her whole body twitched again. The girl's tail jerking back up to attention.

“I just thought this was all nice... I stepped out, maybe put myself at risk, but I finally scored us a... you know, an adventure?”

Rose's ear fins twitched at that word.

“I mean, we've been on the run; that's all pretty exciting. We've had quite a few fights, sure. But we've never really— been on a proper adventure. When we first met, not long after we first met, that's one of the things you said, right? You'd need nothing else. An open road and an adventure is all you needed, right? That's why I thought... If I had the chance to... Make sure we had that...”

I started to find myself at loss for words. My finger reached up toward my cheek and scratched it nervously as my heart beat faster and I got as flustered as a school boy. Everything I did manage to say was true though.

Rose stood up.

“I know I must have made you worry!” I sputtered. “Hearing I might have been in trouble when there's nothing you could do. But you were sleeping so vulnerable there too. So I wanted to—“ I said, forgetting myself and the promise to not stoop so low to that reasoning.

Rose finally turned around and looked at properly for the first time in almost two days. Her amber eyes shook and were glistening.

“That said—“ I tried to voice the conclusion and point of that whole spiel.

But I didn't get the chance to go so far. Rose closed the distance with two quick steps. Her claws reached up and squished my head between her claw's soft and warm scaled palms. She pulled my head down slightly, but she mostly stepped up on her talons and pushed her lips into mine. It wasn't a savage kiss, she didn't slip in any tongue either, but her soft lips completely sealed my own. Her face, her forehead pressed up against mine. That smell of stale water, mud and rotting plants got replaced by the smell of burning pine. My dry mouth overflowed and tasted something salty and sweet from the skin of my lips, which spread to the back of my throat.

A couple seconds wasn't enough, she moaned happily while cutting off my breathing entirely. My arms flailed uselessly. Her body got so hot my instinctual reaction was not to touch it for fear of burning. A more self conscious thought is that I'd get inappropriately carried away if I did.

My arms, my whole body, started to lose its strength quickly as

it starved of oxygen. Those flailing arms settled down and dropped listlessly at my hips.

Behind the girl, her tail exploded back to life and surged into roaring inferno. A backlog of kindle bursting to life all at once. She finally released me from her grip, and the lock of her lips. My knees had turned to mush at some point and I slammed down to the soft ground with a wet thud.

“Alright!” Rose shouted and bounded back into action.

She jogged over to the campfire and where Susan had been preparing our meal. Chris appeared behind me and wrapped her wing arms under my own and lifted me back onto my shaky legs. Everyone else had been watching with stunned and flushed looks on their faces. That spell did not break until Susan freaked out and screamed back when Rose stuck her finger into the boiling stew and sampled it without a care. I myself remained useless until Chris shook me back to my senses and wrapped a wing around my shoulder and leaned down to whisper into my ear.

“Great work, master,” she said and then added a wink.

“Huh, wha? Where am I?” I said in a daze.

Chris merely pushed me forward which forced me to put strength back in my legs or hit the ground again, but this time face first. I noticed right away that Rose had suddenly returned to her usual self. Throwing a quick glance back in my direction every so often with a beaming sharp toothed smile on her face.

Rose spoke jovially to Susan, who was a little overwhelmed, but from the few words I could still make out, and their gestures, she brought her back up to speed about the problem with entering the actual mausoleum itself. The salamander thought hard for a moment, then slammed her fist into her other palm with a eureka moment.

She marched back toward me, and I prayed to whoever would listen to give me a few more seconds to recover. But no one answered and she grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me over to where Ba'el is still hard at work... Was hard at work. She too couldn't help but watch the whole spectacle as it took place.

“Take out the crystal,” Rose said.

“Huh?” I replied, still in a daze.

“Come on now, hurry!” She said again, excitement exuding from her voice.

I fished through my pocket and produced it. I nearly freaked out when she reached out, but she seized me again by the wrist.

“Ha ha~!” She laughed while embracing my body with hers.

But she violently thrust my arm unexpectedly toward the mausoleum wall. The tip of the crystal formed the tip of the spear. My heart skipped a beat. Every thought I had screamed in protest as I expected that crystal to break, shatter, snap, fragment, the whole nine yards... But it didn't. There wasn't even any resistance. It stuck into the stone no harder than it would if dug into the soil, or even stabbed into the surface of a pool of water.

“Menageries are always like this,” Rose declared.

“Mausoleum,” I corrected her, myself still not even half there.

And then it sprang to life. The etchings that were there, the ones that appeared to have been eroded over the centuries, came to life. A magic green glow of energy traced along those lines and many runes came to life. Then they all began to vanish as the earth rumbled and the great wall before us slowly sunk. Meter upon meter of stone gave way. A little more stone gave way in succession, forming a stairway down into the darkness which had been a solid slab a moment ago. This rumbling continued for half a minute until silence descended upon our little camp once more.

“What? How? When?” Ba'el spoke first, flustered and confused. “how did you know? If you had done that in the wrong spot. That would have!”

“Hm hm,” Rose laughed through her nose while puffing out her chest with pride. “Because of that one big lonely circle in the middle, of course. Besides, I've heard this kind of story before in taverns all over. Overheard right from the source: Other, drunken, adventurer types.”

Ba'el turned her head back to the wall which had now become stairs. Then back to Rose. Then to me. She raised her claws up and traced the engravings and runes in the air from memory. Rose turned back around to the other girls who watched with eyes wide open in

shook. Ba'el began to bang her head against the stone beside the entryway. She muttered and cursed to herself over how she could let Rose one up her... It seemed as if she could have lived with anyone else having done so.

It's all rather obvious, in hindsight, I guess.

“Alright! Let's go go go! Adventure awaits!”

Everyone was still too stunned to do anything.

“Rose, wait. Everything is still scattered, we haven't eaten yet and—“

“Adventure awaits!” Her battle-cry sounded out louder than before.

With her claws still wrapped around my wrist, she flashed me a smile bigger and brighter than all the others so far today. Rose did not stop there, she dragged me along behind her while recklessly plunging into the darkness. Her fiery tail lighting the way, while my protests did nothing to stop her.

Chapter 91

We tumbled fifty steps downward through the tunnel before I managed to get Rose's attention. My left arm, still firmly in her grip, felt as though it had nearly been pulled from its socket. A couple dozen more steps of that and gnawing my own arm off at the shoulder wouldn't have appeared as extreme. Thankfully, my pleas for her to stop, listen and follow me back up to the surface did not land on deaf ears.

Her face flushed a deeper shade of red. The girl's excitement, which had halved her mental age along with her maturity, was finally being tempered by embarrassment. She stopped towing me along and that gave me the opportunity to free my arm. She released my wrist from her grip, wrapped my hand around her claw and let me lead her back up to the surface. I pulled gently and she didn't put up any resistance.

Meanwhile, on the surface, the other girls were busy being in a panic. When our heads bobbed back into view, I watched as they ran back and forth in a frantic effort to pull the stakes of the camp back up while barking orders and hurling soft insults. Adrenaline sloughed off them like winter jackets in a sudden and unexpected heat wave.

“Of all the brazen acts—“ Shoshanah huffed.

Rose offered nothing more than a nervous laugh and forced smile as an apology. That would have to do as everyone dropped what they were carrying and gathered back around the campfire and bubbling strew in the pot. Everyone's eyes were elsewhere though, the point at which I had grabbed Rose's claw. The warm feeling finally sunk in and I released her from my own grip while stifling a cough.

“W-we should eat first before going in,” I stuttered.

“And, least we forget, yonder catacombs make no pretence to be anything other than labyrinthine,” Susan sighed, “I'd very much prefer to avoid what I fear would be the inevitable fragmentation of our company.”

“I got the string good to go!” Chris declared, pulling section of a butcher's twine taut between her wing talons.”

“This ain't like your fairy tails, thunder thighs,” Ba'el snided lazily, chin resting on paw.

That was more than enough to send Chris into story telling mode, much to Ba'el's chagrin. A few details and places were mixed up, but it sounded similar to another one I was more familiar with, but Susan stepped in between the two; a gesture that demanded attention.

“Rose—“ the anubis seethed through clenched teeth.

The hairs on her black tail bristled. A fake smile was plastered across her face. Susan displayed herculean will power devotes solely to remaining calm... If calm could be considered the appropriate term to describe her right now.

“Enlighten me: What didst thou expect to accomplish... Alone... Dragging Laven along with you?”

“Ehehehe,” Rose laughed nervously, “I got a little excited. I've got a lotta bodyguard and merc work under my belt, but never adventurer work.”

With a questioning look from me, Rose turned toward me and preemptively answered the question on the tip of my tongue.

“You could say... not so monster friendly folks got a monotony on adventure work.”

“Monopoly,” Susan and I corrected her at the same time.

We cleared our throats together in the exact same manner. I threw an awkward glance toward her and she returned an identical one at me before we each made a hasty retreat by quickly looking away. Susan and decided to cut and run. I walked back to the fire and took my seat with a confused Rose in tow. She sat down on my right with Susan on my left and other three girls arrayed on the opposite side of the crackling fire pit.

“Yeah, what I said,” she said, “Anyways, they don't give out that kinda work to the likes of me. Not even with the paperwork I could throw around.”

We continued the conversation as the stew, still waiting patiently in the blubbing hot pot, was quickly emptied because it had to be spread among six bowls.

“Because such things are not a matter of discretion... Tis banned outright,” Susan declared, pointing her spoon toward Rose and then drawing a continuous circle with it up in the air. “I know not the spirit of the law, but conjecture leads me to conclude the reason is twofold—“

“Loot...And—” Rose cut in and answered first.

“Extermination,” Minte said, her voice soft and pained.

She materialized from the ether and gathered up a lot of courage to say just one word. I'm certain that... carried a hefty memory for her.

“...Because the monsters are where the adventurers are going, or are they there because there are monsters?” I asked.

“Both,” Rose said, and then continued when neither Minte nor Susan cut in. “The story goes, as it got told to me many times... After this last Great War, some thousand years ago, or something, monsters scattered without their Demon Lord to give em orders. So they ran away from Humans. Humans, who got their act together real quick, started poking around the old haunts they got pushed outta. Monsters were squatting there since they had nowhere else to go. Most of em would fight till the end thinking it was there homes now. Besides, they had nowhere else to go... A lot of old heirlooms and valuables got left behind in those places when the humans booked it.

A lot of monsters didn't care for em, didn't need em or use em. So you got together a bunch of humans to go and push those monsters out. Take whatever they find and sell it—“

“Or use it,” Ba'el spoke up from beyond our little circle conversation. “There's a whole business set up around salvaging old magic items. And this business didn't end because the monsters started getting pretty faces. Buncha ne'er–do–wells hunting for the kind of stuff the dolts today couldn't dream of making on their own. An enchanted chamberpot is worth more than regular one filled with silver... And that's got nothing on a good enchanted sword—”

“Or shield,” I said, reminiscing.

The thought of that armoured tank with nothing but a shield in a narrow corridor of that ship. An unassuming shield, but anything that hit it bounced right back in a near perfect about-face. The glimmer the shield gave out beforehand was a dead giveaway that something supernatural had occurred. I shuddered at the thought that you'd have whole gangs of people like that.

Susan nodded and appeared to remember it as well, “That which sets the wheat apart from the chaff.”

But all that said, it left me with a lingering question I had to ask, “If that's what adventurers are... Then why would you ever want to do any of that, Rose?”

I looked back to see her cheeks were puffed out after shovelling too much stew into her mouth all at once. Her confused eyes shot back at me and she quickly swallowed everything all at once to answer me as quickly as possible.

“Going down into the unknown, danger around every corner, daring feats and, of course... Challenging those squatters to a fight!”

Okay. I should have seen that last one coming.

“There's a lot of monsters hanging around in the deepest parts, those that stick around after a long long time have to be real strong. Really real strong!” She said thrusting her spoon into the air as if fighting an invisible foe.

“And they wouldn't let you in because...?”

“—A lot of the good old ruins already have these little towns

that pop up almost overnight."

"Like a gold rush," I mused, juggling the similarities.

"More valuable than just gold," Ba'el claimed. "We're talking loot. Jewels, artifacts, old books, magic scrolls! The real good stuff. You imagine a whole city, abandoned centuries ago, thousands of years ago, buried in the dirt. It's crawling monster colonies.... Whole communities of em... Well, those are tough nuts to crack... If they ever crack at all. Sometimes those towns that pop up over night become ghost towns overnight. Once the risk-reward gets flipped on its head."

"Verily, different from any Demon Realm, as they colloquially are referred to as," Susan added, but then cocked an eyebrow and asked, "But how are you familiar with so much of this? Rose I could understand—"

"I spent near forty years undercover; bouncing from one orphanage to another. Little girls talk. That's all they ever fucking do. Talk talk talk. Rumour mill here, some gossip there. Little girls romanticize the exploits of the real handsome men and make idols out of the pretty and brave women."

"Not that popular so far north," Rose said, crossing her arms and leaning back from her crossed leg sitting position. "You hear less an' less the more up ya go."

"For all the tales of valour you tell me of now, never before had I heard such tales..." Chris muttered with her face disappointed and downcast. "They never let any of these adventurers set up in Domdracveria. The only tales I recall are the brawls between the dragoons and bandits."

"Reason being: they forbade it by more than taboo. Verily, it is committed to law," Susan declared. "Certain regions, who have sensitive areas of cultural and national interest, do not allow others to plunge their depths." She turned her head and addressed Chris directly, "Hence why they would be formally declared bandits in your homeland."

She let out a long sigh as she wracked her brain over our current situation.

"Even here in Yaleria, beyond the great Brightwall, which you should not struggle to see on the horizon... Lays a land entirely off limits."

I had to step into the conversation, “Since when?”

Susan stroked her chin in her paw, her eyes becoming focused on something far beyond our current surroundings. Her supernatural power as a divine judge gave her the power to read the laws of the land. But her forehead wrinkled in distress.

“Since... Forever...”

“Forever?” I said with doubt.

“No written law, nor common law, exists from a time before that monolithic wall. The only mentions which exist. Are of manning it with a defensive force at all times, and it being forbidden to venture beyond it.”

Our whole company went quiet for about a minute while we processed that thought.

“So... Are we being baddies right now?” Chris asked.

“N-no! Absolutely not,” Susan shouted. “We have the very key necessary to enter this place. Without an ounce of effort needed to circumnavigate or nullify any seal. Our job here is a legitimate request from someone of direct descent. Neither do we lay anywhere near the Brightwall and the territory beyond it. There is no embargo against adventurers within Yaleria. Otherwise, you would not have encountered those Silver Bannermen at the manner. Am I mistaken?”

She rattled all that off in quick succession. No doubt desperate to justify herself as not being on the wrong side of the law. If she got carried away more than that she might start hyperventilating.

“O-of course you ain't,” Rose said motioning her claws downward to calm Susan down.

“Y-yeah, t-that sounds about right,” Chris joined in, making the same gesture with her wings.

“Anyways,” Ba'el raised her voice, “Like we were talking about before: A Demon Realm is something that's popped up in the past hundred years or so. Human settlements taken over by monsters... That said, not much use in sending sellswords to sweep those places up. Ain't no loot worth their time or the risk. That's what a good ol' fashioned crusade is for.”

“Oh!” Chris raised her voice, pounding one set of wing talons into the other. “Those big parades of soldiers waving the Star Banners everywhere, right? I remember it now. Years ago... It took almost a week for it to pass through Domdracveria's narrow mountainous paths.”

“Toward Vilmheim,” I added.

Battle scarred ramparts and walls surrounded that city... Years later and they were still being repaired. A pagan majority area of the north; monster friendly, or at least tolerant enough. Open couples everywhere, but it hadn't quite fallen into what I'd say is a Demon Realm. I don't recall that same level of destruction being inflicted onto that succubus haven. It certainly had not been a tent city which could up a move out of an army's way... Maybe it was due to the corrosive atmosphere of that place: A revertible Viagra miasma.

And that's the two pronged doctrine of the Empire, is it not? I stole a glance at Minte whose head was hanging low and letting her spoon's handle roll along the rim of the bowl. She certainly had to have an intimate knowledge for one of those prongs. Yet she continued to stay quiet about it. The pained expression on her face, mostly hidden by the bangs of her hair, and the shadow caused by it, squeezed my heart with an icy claw and stopped me from pushing her to spill out what she knew.

Pagan territories worshipped a pantheon of old gods, or paid most (if not all) respects to a single god who ruled over something that said community relied upon. That is what Shoshanah lectured me on weeks ago. Some even venerated certain types of monsters due to roots of animism and shamanism. That's why they got along so well with monsters. If they weren't trying to enslave, kill or eat them, what difference did they have from the spirits they believed in? But all that would be heresy to The Church of the Almighty. And that Church was the lifeblood of the Empire. Without faith in its doctrines, and obedience to its church, no doubt the Empire would fray and its power split between all the regional peoples.

And then there would be no crusades. Which would mean no Demon Realm land reclaimed.

It's not like we were in any position to stop any of it. Nor was it an obligation. Knowing even a small fraction of what she had to know... It is likely better that I didn't know.

“Now hold on one minute,” Susan spoke up, interrupting the conversion and my train of thought. “You were not entertaining the idea of looting this place, were you?”

The anubis pointed a claw accusingly at the baphomet seated opposite of her.

“Yeah, and?” Ba'el replied, not even understanding how that could be a question.

“This place is a burial site!”

“Tsk,” Ba'el clicked her tongue and looked away.

“Laven briefed us that the mission's objective is to return and artifact to a specified location. A ritual to pay respects to long departed souls. A ritual long overdue... Not to plunder it for all its valuables!”

“Oh come on now, they're not gonna miss them.”

Susan's face contorted into a strange expression that was mixture of anger and amazement that she could be capable of having said that at all.

“The belongings of the dead are for the souls of the departed to take with them unto the life thereafter! You cannot take that which is there's like items which were lost and not reclaimed!”

“Who said they practice the same burial rites?” Ba'el shot back. “Yalerians cremate their dead.”

Susan's anger abated immediately.

“What?”

The anubis had to know what that word meant and its implications. The questioning stutter had been rhetorical. Her encyclopedic knowledge, the dictionary lodged into her brain at even the lowest levels, flipped through and illuminated that single word. She probably wanted it to shrug it off and pretend those canine ears of hers had not heard it at all, but that wouldn't happen.

From the land Shoshanah lived in long ago, hundreds, no, thousands of years she spent locked up in a tomb, all because from her culture, the body in this world, along with all the belongings it was

buried with, carried on into the next and its journey to the final resting place of paradise. An unprepared soul would get lost or sink on the journey there. I wasn't sure what the customs of burial or the afterlife here, but cremation was an outright incineration and destruction of the body in this world.

That would have some serious and troubling implications from Susan's point of view.

And from the corner of my eye I spotted the priestess waver on the large stone she used as a stool. The back of her left paw reached up and pressed against her forehead. The poor girl was about to faint! I dropped my bowl and the rest of contents all over the grass to reach over and catch Susan as she keeled over backward.

“That's... It's actually by law,” her voice came out weak while I raised her back up by the shoulders. “Cremation. Never a proper burial...But why would they...?”

“So...” Rose interjected, “Does that mean they really don't need anything?”

She was asking cautiously, but I could sense a tinge of hopefulness in her voice.

“People bury valuables with their dearly departed all the time. Who's gonna remember if you pinch something or other after a few hundred years. No one left alive is gonna miss any of it or notice it's missing,” Ba'el's poisoned words coagulated into logic.

“Grrr,” Susan growled.

I whispered into her ear, “You'd best compromise instead of fight a losing position. Get a verbal contract from Ba'el. She's a demon and will have to abide by it.”

“Dark Beast!” Ba'el pouted.

There's no way she should have been able to hear that!.. Unless her hearing has always been better than she's let on until now... No. Right here, right now, we'll have to settle this.

I thrust a finger at the baphomet with her arms crossed over her chest and her cheeks puffed out in a nauseatingly cute manner.

“You told me over and over again when we first met that you

were a demon. You were damn proud of it to. What's with the sudden change the last couple weeks?”

“You ever heard of a demon that cannot return to hell?” she said and let her rhetorical question sink in before continuing: “That technically makes me hell-spawn, not a resident of hell. Therefore, as punishment for breaking such a serious contract with that Crone, I am bereft of all my rights and privileges as a citizen of pandemonium, along with it all responsibilities.”

She gave out a wicked little grin and stared right back at me.

“Except the detail of the little pact you pushed on me,” She shrugged her shoulders and raised the palms of her paws into the air, “Oh, how horrible you were. Taking something so important from me with such violence.”

She raised the back of her palm to her forehead in a gesture that mocked Susan's previous fainting.

“Now I'm trapped here. Trapped in this mortal coil... With Big Brother,” She said, opening one eye to look back at me.

A seductive and knowing glance.

A divine ring, a hum and a radiant gold light filled the corner of my right peripheral vision. Shoshanah materialized her staff and thrust the gold Ankh crowing it toward Ba'el. The baphomet didn't see it right away with one eye shut, so she didn't know of it till she felt it. It didn't touch her, but it as soon as it got within some invisible boundary near her, she let out a short yelp and fell backward.

“H-hey hey hey!” She hissed back, baring her fangs.

“So why is it that you still be reproached thus?

“Ehehehehe,” The Demon let out a weak and apologetic whimper.

“If anyone finds anything in, next to, or in the vicinity of any burial spot, leave it be. Respect the dead,” Susan demanded.

That wasn't a suggestion. It was an ultimatum. It was mostly aimed at Ba'el though.

“S-sure, whatever you say, 'mam,” Ba'el managed to utter

while raising her paws in surrender.

Susan moved the staff's head closer.

"I'll leave any valuables next to any corpse or pile of ashes alone! I give my word!"

Susan pulled her staff away after it got a few centimetres from pressing up against Ba'el's cheek which had just now got drenched with sweat. I'd have to be more careful with that girl from now on... And I mean that for both of them. Susan's mood was certainly soured... And with Ba'el... I had to remember to take everything she said with a pinch of salt... No, a whole handful of it. To toss it over my left shoulder when needed.

"Well then!" Rose shouted while jumping to her feet. "I think that settles all that. It's gonna be dark soon, but we got a couple hours walking left in us. Ain't gonna be a good time sleeping on this soggy ground neither. We'll find ourselves a nice dry and solid slab of stone inside. Wont rain on us either."

Our little elevated mount of dirt about thirty meters square was a bit cramped. It's also wet and trying to set up tents or sleeping mats might give me the back kinks of a lifetime. We appeared to finally be in agreement so we gathered up the camp and prepared to plunge into the depths.

"We have yet to prepare marching orders," Susan stated.

Everyone looked around at each other and realized no one had actually yet planned that far ahead. It was a little embarrassing.

Susan sighed, "I figured as much... No matter, I have thought this matter over."

"Darkness, traps, ambushes from unknown forces," Rose said, psyching herself up.

Adrenaline was a drug this girl had an addiction to. She wasn't reminding Shoshanah of the dangers ahead, the girl uttered an itinerary.

"That is why you will take the lead and illuminate the way," Susan said. "Chris, due to her height, will be the rear guard. You will still be able to see over the others."

“Rear guard, the shield of the party...” Chris mused and happily accepted the role.

“Minte and Ba'el shall provide support where and whenever needed to those two,” Susan said glancing at the two... no, glaring at Ba'el.

“Affirmative,” Minte nodded.

“Hold on a second,” Ba'el protested. “That leaves you—“

The anubis priestess clanked the bottom of her rod against the ground and a golden light shone within the keyhole of the ankh.

“I shall remain in the middle... With Laven...”

She puffed out her chest and declared it with pride and confidence. I had a bad feeling. Ba'el's displeasure and sense of injustice spread among the others rather quickly.

“I am to provide support to all, and we are all to protect Laven... In addition to the all important stone he carries. It is logical that I remain in the centre with him.”

A fuzzy feeling wrapped around my hand. Susan's soft paw-pads closed up around my hand while the warmth of her black and silky fur gently tickled my ever fraying nerves. So too for Susan, whose face couldn't hide the blush or keep her lips straight. Her composure and poker face unravelling.

“A-and please do not become lost or separated, Laven. W-we'll make sure of it by maintaining a—“

“Oh no ya don't!” Rose shouted and reached back to grab my left hand.

I broke my silence and pleaded, “Come on! Not now—“

But no one heard me, or cared, because it was Minte next who materialized close behind me and daintily took a bit of the hem of my shirt into her hand. That anchored her right behind me. Next a lightweight dropped down on my shoulders and a pair of fuzzy legs wrapped around my hips and locked in place by a pair of hooves across my stomach. Ba'el piggy backed and rode me while crossing her arms across my neck.

“I'm toooooo short to see otherwise,” She smiled and purposely breathed into my ear and down my neck.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha~” Chris stood off to the side, laughing dubiously with a frail tone.

Now I knew something was wrong when Chris was being the most mature one out of us all. Meanwhile, the rest of us undulated back and forth in a giant mess. Rose took the lead, pulling me along, Susan wrapped herself around my right arm and nearly hung off me as she pulled me back toward herself instead, cursing at Rose and everyone else all the while. Minte quietly hung onto my shirt with a bit of fabric pinched between her thumb and index finger while Ba'el's giggled and I felt her flat chest pressed up against my back. Her hips bumped against my lower back as if they were spurs to urge me onward.

And like that, our whole party stumbled its way through the threshold of the crypt and down the stairs. How we didn't all fall and crumble into a mess down the stairs... I don't know. How long they'd keep this up before coming to a trice and separating... I didn't know that either.

***

When the entrance closed behind them... Neither Laven, nor the others, noticed. Nor would they have known or could have predicted how, or why.

Chapter 92

Open skies were now behind and the orange glow of Rose's fiery tail replaced the pink glow of dusk. That tail of hers, our strongest and most reliable source of light, cast shadows onto the dreary stone halls from and I watched as they morphed into otherworldly beings that watched us from afar while we marched descended deeper into the earth. Their strange shapes were alien, unknown, just like the path ahead of us.

The darkness in front of us peeled back, but our surroundings never changed. An unending rectangle of stone stretched on for as long as we kept walking. We could be going in circles for all I know, I grumbled to myself. Minte must have picked up on what I thought I had said quietly to myself and began marking the walls with her scythes. We never encountered those gashes again, so settled that we were not stuck going in circles. It's a small comfort, because the alternative was that we were travelling somewhere far away and we still didn't have a clue as to how far.

That door served as the ideal gate, it locked this realm away and went so far as to sell the feeling we left for whole other world.

And I'd be considered an expert on that sort of thing.

Not a single root from that marsh's mighty trees managed to chew through the ancient masonry. That lush greenery and bounty of nature abandoned us as we delved deeper into the dead earth. I didn't miss the soggy ground though. I'd stick to this cold hard ground any day. However, the absence of birdsong, insects chirping and frogs croaking had been substituted with nothing, nothing but the empty and lonely echoes of our footsteps. It's only by the virtue of the girl's bursts of jovial conversation that keep the chill of the cold earth from squeezing my heart tight.

Rose and Chris exchanged stories about the daring heroes who had plunged into similar dungeons and catacombs like this.... A lot of the stories ended up being told from monster's perspective halfway through... With predictable results after their capture.

Ba'el kept going about the great treasures she hoped to find and what she could do with different palmfuls of gold and jewels... Some of them made me feel uncomfortable.

Minte kept quiet, but I could always feel her presence at my backside. Occasionally I could feel a poke or sudden strike of a finger,

but when I turned around her expression remained blank, the same as always. That didn't mean her antenna were twisting, turning and pulling back as if they were silently saying, “Who? me?”

Besides Rose's tail, a steady chime accompanied a faint glow from Susan's golden staff. A sickly orb of light pulsated within the keyhole of her staff's crowning ankh. It gave enough light to illuminate what the priestess had been spending all this time reading with her head down. Her eyes poured over a weathered parchment which she struggled to hold, fold and rotate the map with a single paw. It reminded me of someone struggling with an oversized road map in the cramped confines of a car's passenger seat.

As amusing as it was to watch her stubbornly tackle it all by herself, I eventually found myself compelled to help her.

“Do you need me to hold either of those for you?” I said, reaching out with a helping hand.

“N-no, not at all!” She stuttered while hurriedly refolding the map.

Susan retreated from my approaching hand and attention of the other girl's locked onto us. A detente which has formed for the past hour nearly melted, but Susan waved it away in a hurry.

I should have expected that reaction. After we spent the first fifteen minutes with all five of them hanging off of me, but before it came to blows, I lost my temper. One slip or slow reaction while trying to get down those stairs with that much weight bearing down on me, or pulling me side to side, would have caused all five of us to tumble down the rest of the steps like a bucketful of Slinkys.

“We've been going in a straight line for hours now.” Ba'el groaned, a barb hidden within her tone. “You should have figured that out by now, Miss Genius.”

There were better ways to break this rut, but not from Ba'el, I suppose.

“This is but an axillary entrance!” she barked back. “A series of catacombs and crypts lay further within the labyrinth. Tis designed like a veritable colony for ants. If I fail to comprehend it now...”

She let out a heavy sigh.

“I am a fool for not suspecting such a thing. All those hours on our journey here, wasted.”

“In that swamp? With all the mud? If you walked it with only one hand and dropped it, we'd be in a lot more trouble than we are right now.” I said, trying my best to calm her down.

I only needed a quick glance at the map to agree with that metaphor and her pain. Whoever the cartographer was deserved to have been fired... But she only glared at me in response... Which she would, of course. How crass of me to point out that she might be absent minded enough to walk like she is now in ankle high muck that she took a couple spills over the past couple days.

“Then it's not to scale?” Chris asked, her head looming above my own and looking down at the crumpled map.

I breathed a sigh of relief after Chris' save. That pulled Shoshanah's wrath off of me.

“No, it's not,” she grumbled while tracing her index claw across the parchment. “By conjecture, I've determined that we have approached from this South-Easterly direction: Along this straightened path here.”

But that only took up a few centimetres from the edge of the map. It immediately broke open into a mess of what I could only guess were thousands upon thousands of rooms both large and small. And either those rooms were all massive, given how long we've been walking straight, or the map was an abstraction upon abstraction. Either answer would lead to trouble. The whole map is basically a blob of black ink on parchment. If I weren't looking at it from behind I would never be able to tell its age.

Making out one line from the next, where the outline of one floor or section began and the other ended, they all meshed together. Susan nearly went cross-eyed a few times trying to decipher tiny segments cluttering the piece of paper that unfolded to a width of nearly one and a half meters

That map was one of the few things stowed away in that purse that Hyria handed to after I accepted her request. After spending the money to resupply ourselves... Which I berate myself over because I didn't negotiate to have our expenses covered... The only other thing that remained is the mysterious emerald crystal. It looked so delicate, and so very expensive, that I loathed to expose it to the air any longer

than I had to. I tied the mouth of the purse tighter and secured it around the loop of my belt.

"Relax~," Rose said, a chipper tone in her voice going strong. "We got supplies for a week... No, wait..."

She looked down at her burning tail.

"Six days if I gotta keep this up," she reassured us, holding her tail and presenting it to us in all its luminescence. "...No, wait. Six days if we go far enough to hit magma."

I couldn't keep moving and came to a stop. Everyone else followed suit immediately. I rubbed my aching temples between my thumb and middle finger.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

"It would be a most unfortunate, but natural result of an erring in our journey," Susan said.

"You're joking... This place can't possibly go—"

Her all too serious eyes were same as always.

I coughed the nervousness out of my throat, "You— you just keep reading that map..."

We needed to keep going, but my feet planted themselves to the ground as if kept there by a fly strip. The soles of my feet throbbed painfully and refused to go on one more step. A rolling stone with no more momentum to carry on now that I had stopped.

"My feet are about to burst from my boots. It has to be well into the night by now. If this is gonna kept going can we at least start tackling it tomorrow?"

My gaze travelled across the semi-circle of the five girls, and every one of them didn't look nearly as beat as I was. Rose titled her head at me; she had far too much energy and was could barely contain her excitement. I couldn't read Minte's blank expression, but she could probably march on indefinitely without complaint until her body gave out. Chris and Susan suppressed a pair of frowns and averted their eyes, they finally remembered I didn't have the same kind of stamina finally dawned on them. Ba'el threw her head and stared up at the ceiling while letting a long disappointed sigh emptied her lungs.

“I don't have the feet ta feel with ya—” Ba'el said while clopping her hooves on the floor. “—But I'm still gonna agree. This nothing but walking walking walking is driving me nuts!”

There was more impatience than sympathy in her voice... And the beginnings of a temper tantrum. However, our supplies were limited as were our funds and that meant we were also short on time. If we didn't dive in headlong and make use of all our time, we'd be forced to backtrack. Our six days really meant three.

“Hey hey—“ Rose frowned and planted her claws on her hips in protest. “We can't just turn in when we're still at the beginning of the beginning. That's for the end of the beginning.”

“Thou art eager,” Susan sighed, “But Laven and the runt are correct.”

“Hey!” Ba'el shouted.

Everyone ignored her though.

“Cramped,” Minte said looking around at the passageway which wasn't wide enough to let us walk any more than three of us, shoulder to shoulder.

“How about that spot then?” Chris chimed in while spreading a wingspan toward the darkness.

Huh?

Our collective grunt and stupefied expression echoed out into the darkness she presented to us. Susan clanked the bottom of her staff against the floor and the shining orb of light broke free and went racing down the hallway sending shadows flying in every direction. It didn't vanish after traveling laterally though. The wisp flew upwards and vanished. We all moved at once, with Chris and her wide grin followed us from behind.

Her smile's raison d'etre became apparent when Rose's tail no longer painted the walls orange. A large antechamber spread out in all direction with a darkness she could not piece. The light from Susan's staff flew in circle eights near the ceiling which reached upward ten meters above us.

The map in Shoshanah's paws unfolded in an instant. In her

excitement she let her staff, so she could do it properly with both paws, which left me be the one who would grab hold of it as it began to keel over. Her roaming light orbited my head a couple times before returning to the keyhole of her staff and gave proper illumination to the map. The anubis' red eyes blazed a trail across the myriad of black etching until she jammed a claw onto a specific room.

“This must be it!.. It could be no other,” She declared.

“Hmm hmm hmm,” Chris chuckled from her throat. “Perseverance is the currency from which victory is bought.”

“How long did you spend thinking that one up,” I quipped back.

“About thirty minutes ago, when I saw this room up ahead.”

What?

Chris didn't respond to the look I had on my face, nor any of the others which looked similar to mine.

“Damn... Right,” I groaned. “Your eyes...”

Chris had eyes as sharp as an eagle and as potent as an owl's. But that factoid wasn't going to stop me chewing her out.

“Then why didn't you bring that up earlier!?” I shouted.

The last couple kilometers wouldn't have sucked so much if I had known we were on the final stretch! I was about to scream, but held myself back. There's no need to overdo my complaints.

“Because of the dramatic reveal,” she bellowed and moved her wings in an act of theater. “The stepping out from the cramped corridors and the thrill of sudden victory: why would I trample on such feelings and deny those powerful emotions!”

Her wings dropped down to her sides and her excitement quickly bottled up again.

“Opportunity missed. A shame,” she exhaled and shook her head.

I'd shake her by the shoulders or put her into a headlock for leading me on like that on purpose... If I were tall enough... However, a quick flash of her smile down toward me piled guilt on me. You just

wanted to see that look on my face, didn't you? That's what the look on your face is telling me, right? I couldn't stay mad in the face of such an innocent smile and I was forced to swallow my anger. My inner softness made it bounce around a few times in vain before dissolving into the past.

"It is confirmed," Susan declared once more. "Given the contours of this room, tis laid on the top most floor for this entire region."

"A lotta doors..." Rose gasped.

She walked forward and spun herself around, the orange torch light scraped over each wall. Several dark openings were scattered across the room, both on our current floor and on stories above. There were also signs that plans existed to make many more. Among the dozen open passageways, two dozen more had decorated archways, but their entrances were closed off with uncut stone.

"A lot more sealed doors," I said, echoing Rose.

"Whip out that crystal of yours and get to work then," Ba'el said... Suggestively.

"Let's not," I declined. "I'd rather not test our luck. This thing could be glass instead of diamond for all we know, so let's not smash it against every locked door we come across."

Ba'el let out harrumph and sulked her way toward the archways on her own.

"Let no one else but you touch it. Under any and all circumstances," Hyria's voice replayed inside my mind.

Those words of hers, retold by me, weren't quite enough to sate Ba'el's curiosity. The Anubis priestess, the only other girl who showed any interest, wasn't about to disrespect any ritual. Hearing that alone would be enough for her to give up. Susan wasn't about to foul up anything which had to do with honoring the dead. Convincing Ba'el, on the other hand, proved to be much harder. Her eyes, sharing the same color as the crystal, were drawn to its fine cut ridges. The emerald crystal looked a lot like key, and after the little hiccup at the gate, it ended up worked like one too. My heart nearly stopped when Rose grabbed me by the wrist and rammed it into the stone wall; I thought it would shatter like ice.

Ba'el, meanwhile, salivated over the thought of cracking the crystal open and spilling its insides. I too was curious, but we didn't have the time, nor the right to pry it open and figure out how it worked. Her rebelliousness almost carried her to defy orders, but after giving it a quick look-over beyond arms length, she sighed and lost interest. She grumbled something about, “Not a speck of mana”.

But something else had caught the baphomet's attention. She inspected each door in the room. Her cute little nose twitched each time she sniffed the air.

My eyes wandered away and across the room. I pondered aloud to myself.

“This place looks... Unfinished...”

The murmurs of the girl's moving about and talking to one another continued, but I wandered out and looked over the room once more and let its atmosphere sink in.

“And if this is a crypt. They were expecting a lot more dead people before the end.”

And the room went quiet. I didn't think I had said it that loudly, but my voice carried far and loud enough for the girls to look my way. Their expressions ranged from alarmed to aghast.

“Well. No. That's not exactly what I—“

Rose stroked her chin, “When ya put it that way...”

“A great multitude of questions about the intentions and history of this place arises...” Susan brooded.

“Like they left in a hurry,” Ba'el added.

Rose turned to the demon, and Ba'el turned toward the salamander.

“That's quite the mystery they left behind,” Rose said.

“Mysteries can't be all they left behind,” Ba'el replied.

“It can't be helped if they dropped anything. Ain't like it's our fault they put it in the wrong spot and forgot about it,” Rose nodded in return.

“Technically ain't stealing if it's lost and found.”

“And if one came 'round to claim it...”

Rose and Ba'el came to an understanding with one another, their eyes glimmering. Shoshanah glared at them with fire in her eyes, but held her tongue. If those two teamed up, not even an enraged Susan could stop them.

All the tension I had built up melted out of me with a sigh, “That's not what I was getting at.”

What interested me wasn't what treasures might have been left behind. I'm not immediately concerned with the why, how and when either. It's the what that worried me.

“It's for what reason they made this place. What caused them to give up so suddenly and leave this place behind.”

“Fear not, master!” Chris shouted behind me.

I shook violently and nearly jumped out of my skin. She somehow got behind me and into my blind-spot.

“I'll protect you, no matter what or who appears,” she said with resolve as she pounded her clenched up foretalons against her, now bouncing, chest.

Chris hammed that line up so much that I had to look away and couldn't muster a thanks in response.

“T-that just leaves where then,” I said to change the subject. “And for starters... Where did Minte get to?

I looked around for the assassin, which was usually a waste of time, but found her standing idle across the room. From her barely visible silhouette, she looked up at something. I slid up behind her and she didn't so much as turn to acknowledge my approach. An inscription engraved across the top arch of the doorway she stood before answered the first question: what's so fascinating that it can keep Minte in rapt attention.

Her antenna were stretched out as far as they could go and tapping up against the series of runes stretched along arch of the entryway. It wasn't bright enough for me to make them out, so I called Rose over and her tail lit the corner of the room up.

But the runes there were a completely different alphabet from the ones I've grown used to seeing throughout my travels. I still couldn't read those either, nothing more than the most elementary of elementary, but I could tell right away that these markings were different. I thought at first that perhaps it could be an ancestor of the current tongue, but that turned out to not be so, but these curves and dots on each line were a different language altogether.

“Can you read that, Minte?” I asked.

She poked the pop-out stone runes a few more times and inspected it with her eyes now that there was proper light, but shaking her head is all she could do.

“No,” she replied weak and curtly.

That left me to wonder why it had caught her attention.

“It's a warning,” Ba'el said with half the heart needed to make such an important statement profound.

But her voice was uncharacteristically serious. A grim expression on her face highlighted her eyes as they scanned back and forth over text.

“A typical 'abandon hope, all ye who enter' bullshit.”

“And the literal translation?” I asked.

“Hell if I know. Humans keep making up new languages all the time. You think I was gonna bother memorizing them all?”

She thrust her claw into the air and jabbed at each rune in proxy as she explained.

“Some of these shapes are universal, ya see? All the languages on this continent, no matter where or far back ya go... They share some basic forms. It all shares some common origin, or something like that.”

“Tis an older script of Yalerian,” Shoshanah said, approaching with the unfolded map still in her paws. “That would render these runes very old indeed. And I loathe to agree, but the demon is correct... Save for the hieroglyphs of the Northern Forgotten Kingdom”

“That's because they weren't native to the region.”

Susan's tail went rigid and bristled with fury, the ears atop her hear perking up like the exclamation mark tattoos on her stomach.

“Come again!?”

Ba'el jabbed her pinky claw into her ear and twisted it around to dig out the scream that was now bouncing around inside.

“Ah~ I messed up... But if ya really wanna hear that story, ask me when the biased party ain't here,” she said while throwing me a bored sidelong glance.

She walked away with that cryptic message and melted back into the pseudo-darkness of the room, to where we had let our belongings slump to the ground. Her expression, a paradox of childish appearance with a mature woman's wisdom, winked at my suggestively. She layered it on so thick that it stuck to my ski... That might be sweat, actually.

“Of all the—“ the anubis growled and bared her teeth at the retreating silhouette.

I made a desperate attempt to change the subject to something more productive.

“You said it's Old Yalerian?”

Susan sighed and turned back toward me, “That is correct. Before the last war against demon-kind, from before the various kingdoms of this land were united into The Empire, many languages existed. All of them shared a similar origin, as Ba'el said. Phonetically and grammatically they were similar. As were they structurally similar in alphabet... But they we originally distant in the construction of their vocabulary. An endless series of rearrangements, all from shared ancestral syllables.”

“...And that means?”

Chris' booming voice interrupted from behind, “This here was carved at least a thousand years ago... But no earlier than from three thousand.”

Susan and I's eyes nearly bulged out of our sockets.

“Ahahaha~” Chris laughed and scratched the back of her head with one of her wing's talons. “Stop, really. That ain't too impressive... I mean, even I can spot a couple markings that look a lot like Old Verian.”

Domdracverian.

Susan coughed and continued, “This is also correct. I learned this all myself during my brief tenure at the library within Castle Zern.”

Back when we were hired at Domdracveria's capital of Ifern.

“With enough manuscripts at hand, given that they follow basic scripts with common ancestry, there are particulars which are ultimately ubiquitous. It is possible to 'reverse engineer' the current common tongue backwards...”

That needed some clarification.

“Which means you can read whatever is—“

“Negative,” Susan cut me off. “Yalerian is beyond me. I did not put it memory, nor encountered any such texts within that library. I can only recognize a minute sampling of significant strokes and specific runes... But that is enough to tell me no one is meant to pass beyond this point... For fear of retribution.”

Hyria's warning and her own fears came to mind.

“Booby trapped,” I said.

“Heh heh,” Rose chuckled.

“Anyways,” Susan stressed her voice to silence Rose, “Beyond this point will lay danger. I fear our map doth agrees that this is the passage we must take to reach our destination... It would behoove us to be rested and in prime condition before tackling this challenge.”

“Forty winks and a later second dinner it is then!” Rose declared. “Lost treasures, unknown depths, hidden dangers... I can hardly wait! All that's missing is a big old—”

“Stop stop stop!” I shouted while waving my hands. “We don't have wood down here to knock on, so don't force that idea into

my head.”

“B-but...” Rose pouted.

I grit my teeth and struggled to pull away from her glistening eyes as she learned over and pressed her claws together in prayer... She looked like a lost puppy.

“L-let's just focus on the problems we have and not go looking to create new ones!.. We can start by filling our stomachs and getting a good night's sleep for once.”

The other girls dismissed themselves went back to set up the camp in the center of the room.

Promises of a feast flipped Rose's mood a hundred and eighty degrees. Susan plopped herself down cross-legged to tackle the map another time. Chris and Minte took their turn to set up the camp while Ba'el sat alone in the back. She drew magic runes in the air. They were actual lines of light that hung briefly in the air before she swatted them away to reset her invisible calculation sheet. What she's up was beyond me, but she had whipped out her pipe out which billowed the smoke of oppugnant herbs. That's enough to tell me to stay out of her way for now.

I myself remained at the door to soak in that warning by myself. Those lifeless runes glared back me and I let an ominous feeling linger for few seconds longer. Eventually I turned my back to them and rejoined the others who set upon me with all their hospitality.

Meanwhile, Hyria's playful and refined expression bubbled back up from my memories. Far all the magic she could muster, she knew that this was a point she could not venture past. A large sum of money would have to deflect the lingering question as to why she'd seek me, and the girls, to do this little ritual on her behalf.

But as turned back to the door, and before I joined the others and their escalating festivities, an eerie chill bid me farewell.

***

It took a single night stand with the cold solid ground to fill me with regret and longing for the great outdoors. Stiffness and a terrible cramp overtook me the moment I awoke and found myself back in ghastly burrow someone dared deign as a crypt. Memories of a nice warm bed seemed like a distant memory steeped in delusion. Whole

vertebrae along my spine felt out of place, the sleeping mat I laid out offered no preventive care.

We had yet to see any of the dead buried here and that was just as well, because not even the dead could find any suitable slab of tone to call their final resting place.

They hadn't even finished building the place. Whoever built this place gave up halfway through, leaving nothing but empty carved out tunnels in the earth. Beyond this room the majority of those tunnels were rough stone and totally unlike the smoothed corridor we had marched down last evening.

After my body finished registering the stiffness, a chill spread through my body and each joint creaked like an unoiled gear. The cracking of my joints acted as an alarm-bell for the other girls who roused lazily from their sleep. Except for Minte, who I didn't spot until I turned around and saw her sitting seiza immediately behind me where my head had been resting before.

I reached with my hand to the back of my head and felt a residual warmth. I craned my neck back and forth and noticed it didn't so much as creak or sting with pain. Her eyes stared up at me without a flicker of emotion, the only difference in her appearance would be the slightly blackened bags underneath her eyes: no doubt from her being charged with being the last one in rotation for guard duty.

My hair felt a little more tossed and ruffled than usual as well. Minte bowed her head, stood up and skittered away before I was awake enough to stop her.

The other girls fared better than I. Rose reignited after from being sluggishly cold blooded after that tail's flame sparked and her eyes shot open with youthful energy. She bounded her way over to me and gushed about her excitement about what today's expedition would turn up. Rose had yet to lose a single iota of enthusiasm. It's a blessing, because her vigor and smile rubbed off a bit on me too. Our journey had been marked with passive and reactive activities, but here we were, actively rediscovering something lost. It too was something Rose coveted, because her own experiences revolved around mercenary work and this is the first time she'd get to live out being one of the adventurers she envied.

All the other girls were more reserved, but I could spot excitement in their movements and in their voices. Shoshanah cracked

a wry smile at the map now, she was apparently close to a breakthrough in deciphering the madness of ink. Her watch had been first and so she used the rest of the night in meditative state to refresh her mind which granted her a revelation.

Chris's minor stint of claustrophobia had mostly waned, but her sleep cycle got cut in half with her being stuck in the middle of the other four girls— especially when she refused to let me take my turn. “I cannot allow my master to stir while I sleep soundly,” is what she said. There was also the bit she added in the end with a troubled expression. Something about it being unknightly to watch over a bunch of girls sleeping— defenseless. I couldn't follow her logic at that point, in the middle of the night and decided to take her up on the offer rather than argue.

Ba'el remained— as elusive as ever; distracted and aloof while moving her paws as flapping her lips as if working with some invisible Rubik cube and talking herself through some manner of ritual. That didn't stop her from throwing out the occasional rude comment or sly smile when she caught me looking her direction. She's still far too detached and preoccupied though...

After a simple breakfast, we gathered up our camp and set out down the door which loomed over use the entire night before. Memories of stirring in my sleep and finding myself staring down into its inky darkness returned to me. So too did the chilling feeling that crept up my back no matter which way I faced it.

“Come on, come on!” Rose shouted with glee as her vice grip seized me by the wrist.

She didn't get very far though. Chris appeared behind her and got her claws underneath Rose's arms and lifted the salamander's feet off the floor. Her legs flailed as if she were still running for a couple seconds before they began kicking back and forth and her mirthful chanting gave way to angered protest. The wyvern had to turn her face away from the furious burst of flame that erupted from Rose's tail, sweat already starting to pour off Chris from exposure to the heat.

“We discussed this at length among ourselves,” Shoshanah said with a sigh as she stepped forward into Rose's field of vision. “Someone else shall relinquish you of serving as the vanguard until you are capable of demonstrating the barest modicum of restraint.”

Rose's legs stopped kicking and she stared back at Susan.

“And cease with those pouting eyes immediately! I shall not allow you to connive your way out of this!”

“Sorry,” Chris said with a weak chuckle while lowering Rose back down to the ground.

“Chris will take the lead for now,” Susan dictated to the dejected Rose, “Her eyes are best suited to piecing the darkness and behold paths ahead of us the furthest. YOU, on the other hand, shall remain in the rear guard.”

A look of shock broke Rose's feigned expression like a hammer to porcelain. It nearly moved me to interject, but I couldn't quite disagree with what Susan said, or the spirit of what she's doing and what it hoped to prevent. Being rash, reckless and risk taking wasn't going to help any of us at this point.

Without any further interruptions, we set off into the crypt along a pre-planned route that the anubis had slaved over the night before. The giant room gave way to a corridor which shared the same dimensions as the one before, but its construction lagged behind a couple years. Not even half of the walls had been chiselled out and smoothed down to the same level of artistry. Raw stone, carved out by manual labor instead of a skilled mason, spotted the ceiling and the floor.

The further down we went, the drier my nose became and my eardrums ached to pop. This whole place was bone dry, and the air pressure got stronger the closer we delved deeper into the ground. I could already feel the temperature rise a couple degrees too. We could already be half a kilometer under the surface by my guess.

Chris took the lead, as planned, with Susan following a number of footsteps behind her. Ba'el stuck to the center while I hang back with a dejected Rose and Minte whose presence I could feel solely by a tingling sensation on the back of my skull.

The more I moved and warmed my muscles the less sore I felt, but the eerie tension and chill never abated. Goosebumps crept up along my arms despite how far down we travelled or how close I strayed to Rose and her radiating body heat. It didn't help when our path suddenly became very complicated. Going forward had been our only choice for almost an hour until side rooms and countless narrow corridors started springing up. Each of those rooms had dozens of holes dug out from the walls. All of them were deep enough, and wide

enough, to slide a body into. Which way didn't matter, there were holes for all preferences.

Head first so your feet would stick out. Shallow, but wide enough to slip in and lay down as if it were a bunch.

Thousands of man hours worth of labor, but hardly any remains at all. My heart jumped whenever I actually saw a pair of bleached bone feet sticking out, but they were few and far between. Mounds of bones and skeletal remains were virtually nonexistent. After a couple of hours winding through the crypt I counted three complete skeletons and only about four times that in random femurs, skulls or a ribcage laying about.

Ash is what we found a lot of. Undisturbed mounds of ash, usually piled up in the center of each room.

There were too many of those ash piles; so many that it hooked onto Shoshanah's curiosity to the point that she could no longer contain herself. The priestess excused herself and cautiously veered off into an adjacent room along our path.

“I sense no defensive mechanism here, worry not,” was her reply.

I could hear Rose huff and pout beside me over Susan getting her way when she could not. It could be that her own curiosity had been lit up that prevented her from protesting the supposed hypocrisy.

Susan approached a large conical pile of ash in the centre of the room that came up to her knees. She knelt down on the floor and poked hesitantly at the pile, and then let the pads of her paws run across it, then grab a handful of it to let it sift back down on top of the pile. The ash shone a brilliant white in the light of her staff, her red eyes narrowing and glinting in the darkness.

“This had better be good,” Ba'el sighed and was the second to enter the room.

I followed behind her and stood in the corner to watch Susan work while Ba'el loomed over her shoulder.

“Bone ash,” the anubis muttered.

“It is a burial place after all,” Chris chimed in from the doorway.

“One does not acquire such ash from mere decomposition.”

“Bones are still twenty-something percent water...” I said, drawing Susan's attention away from the ash and into my eyes.

The expectant look in her eyes threw me off for a moment. There was a particular and peculiar intensity, but I pressed on.

“I-I think? Pretty s-sure that's it.”

“Come on now, Laven.” Ba'el chuckled lightly, as if I had said something painfully naive. “If it's bone, it's gotta be mostly earth with some fire in it... well, maybe not so much fire what with the body being dead.”

“Shush!” Susan growled at the demon.

Ba'el must be talking about the four humours. An antiquated model, but not totally unexpected. My knowledge felt... limited. I'd never be able to prove what I was about to say in any way, and without a clue as to how, but I continued on because Shoshanah appeared hungry to know.

“Calcium phosphate.”

“Is what you'd have remain if you immolated human remains.”

Susan rose back to her feet and turned back to face the other four: Minte and Rose peeking their heads from behind Chris in the doorway.

“Hey,” Rose piped up and slipped her way into the room under Chris' wing. “You don't 'burn' bones to ash. That takes a lot of heat... And I'd know.”

I bet she would.

Susan ignored the salamander proudly jabbing her thumb talon into her chest and flicking her tail back and forth and continued.

“You said it was a cultural practice to... to...”

She still had a hard time imagining it.

“Cremation,” I said to help her out.

“That... If they did that... Then why would they have bothered to construct such a labyrinth? Why would there still remain a random assortment of intact remains?”

“You can knock it off with the rhetorical questions and spell it out for the others,” Ba'el said, crossing her arms in front of her chest with impatience.

“This purge is most likely a reaction... A reaction and potentially a great heretical act. Given the hints of more civilized burial rites I've observed here, the destruction of these remains appears unnatural.”

Her voice picked up the pace and got faster and faster.

“Although I see no evidence that proper mummification took place. Such a waste. Such a crime. How else did these savages expect these poor souls to make it to their destined afterlife as their bodies rot away from them? Tis verily a simple procedure. Base slaves can be trained to perform is adequately on a mass scale. Given the desiccation of this locale, and in spite of bogland being suitable to preserve bone material whilst the living beings rife in the environment above would wreak havoc on the flesh; it is not unthinkable, given this apparent scale of scope of sophistication in architecture and excavation, that they could easily have-”

“Whoa, slow down there now, Susie,” Rose said and waved her hands in front of Susi- Shoshanah's face to stop her rapid-fire rant.

The anubis was about to snap back with her usual, 'don't call me that', yet kept her cool and let her anger ooze out with a droop of her shoulders.

“Ahem... What I mean to conclude is this: I'm led to believe that was the de facto funeral and burial procedure. I am led to believe otherwise. At least until recently... Relatively speaking.”

Chris answered first, but unsure of herself.

“Because of the Brightwall?”

“If that were true, why bother disposing of remains on this side in such a barbaric manner? I am lead to believe that wall acts as seal to keep its influence at bay and has remained particularly effective.”

“Keep out cursed beings,” Minte spoke up.

“...You remember which, right?” Rose turned to her and asked.

The assassin shook her head.

“The undead,” Chris said in a dramatic and sinister voice. “That's the legend I know. The dead rise from the battlefield and shamble across it with single-minded purpose and ill intent. Hungry to feast on brains. Never tiring, never dying... They slumber beyond the wall, waiting for anyone foolish enough to stumble into their cursed realm”

“Ah! Then maybe that's why they'd—”

“That is an insufficient explanation for the destruction of bone,” Susan interrupted.

“Hey hey! You can create those too, can’t cha'?”

“I am someone proficient in the creation of mummified remains. They may be blessed with a semblance of life, but they are merely preserved corpses reanimated with a portion of the departed's spirit. One does not simply bring bones to life. Not without muscle, tissue, sinew.”

“Oooh! I've heard another legend like that too. From the islands to the far South-West,” Chris said. “Zombies. Buried in the dirt, mouths stitched shut, afraid of salt—”

“Do not conflate my divine rites with some backwater tribal shamanism!”

A ruckus sprung up between Susan, Chris, Minte and Rose. Bringing up that mummification usually involves removing vital organs which would make life impossible, but I decided against it. Her version of mummification could be completely different for all I knew. She hasn't exactly told me detail how it's done beyond applying a curse which forcefully bound the spirit to its body. There was also little reason to stick my head into the mess of that conversion. I decided on getting to the heart of the matter through another avenue. If there were anyone else who might be hiding an answer, it'd be Ba'el.

“You're not holding out to watch them argue and reason in

circles for your own amusement, are you?"

"Laven, please. You wound me," the demon replied, rather melodramatically.

That wasn't a yes or no answer. I would have also bought a roundabout yes or no.

"...And?"

"Look, given how hard the pooch has worked building all this up, I'd love to see the looks on your faces when I drop the bomb... But don't forget my memories are in as big a mess as yours. I don't ever recall having a single incarnation of mine being in this place or anywhere near a hundred leagues of it... I'm not exactly someone with a tourist's knowledge of the place. I'm still not sure what's got her worked over everything. Worrying about dead people ain't something I care about, or ever cared out. Their souls? Yes. But I never gave two shakes of my tail to their squishy bits."

We stared at one another awkwardly for a moment. I had a sense of dread that—

A sardonic smile spread across her face, "Except what was between their— "

"Alright, I get it! Thank you!"

"—Then we'll find all that out when we get to the bottom of this, right?" Rose said, bringing the other conversation to a halt. "That lady will know, right? She's gotta know something, just keeping mum about it. She'll have to show her face at least once and we'll know then."

That would have to placate us for now. We ended up with more questions after leaving the room then we entered it, but the excitement of the unknown blew away from of the malaise and dullness of our march further into the crypt.

It would be only an hour later that we would have had that banished regardless.

Chris had been blazing the trail in front of us when one of her talons sunk suddenly into the floor. Subtle, suspicious, but outdone by the crack and rumbling all around us. We weren't afforded so much as a single second before the whole ceiling came crashing down... in front

of us. A pile of debris, from boulders to pebbles, crashed down instantaneously before us. But one boulder, three times the size of our heads, slammed right into the top of Chris' head.

I screamed out her name in a panic, the other girls were frozen in mid dash, but still with both feet on the ground... But all for nought. The boulder rolled forward off her head, the edges of the roundish boulder following the curvature of her horns, and it crashed onto the floor in front of her. Ground beneath her talons had cracked under their collective weight, and the force at which the boulder dropped, yet the wyvern stood tall.

Chris turned around and couple trickles of blood began streaming down her face. Her lips were also quivering along with eyes that were watery and prepared to burst into tears. She typically had a permanent childish expression on her mature features, but this was a rare one.

“Are- are you alright, Chris?”

“I aM pErfecTly AlrIGht,” Chris' wobbly voice seethed through clenched teeth.

She was messed up alright.

“Oi, bitch! What's the deal? I thought you were supposed to have a keen eye for these sorts of thing?” Ba'el yelled, chastising Susan.

“I-I do!”

While Susan went to work investigating, I grabbed hold of Chris by her claw and led her away from the debris pile. She didn't offer any resistance and followed along and sat down against the wall to let me inspect the damage.

A rather comical sized bump formed on the top of her head. Some of the skin of her scalp got broken and caused the bleeding, dying her pink hair a shade of red. I saw no signs of fracture, but that didn't rule out anything less like a concussion. At least her neck moved just fine, so no damage had travelled down her spine and caused any serious injury. But that still didn't explain what brought her to tears when I had been with her when she fractured her arm... Perhaps it is down to adrenaline dulling the pain?

I could imagine a girl with as thick a skin as Chris might not

actually be able to handle pain very well. She isn't the type who gets hurt easily.

“This is not possible,” Susan gasped.

Ba'el sighed at the impasse and decided to start working on clearing the way. Rose joined in and the two of them used their strength to start digging a way through. Ba'el also pulverized the larger stone into finer bits with her bare paws and made quick work of the debris.

I fished out some relatively sterile linen and cleaned the wound on Chris' scalp. Minte joined in to help me. She wasn't the type who had brute physical strength to move any of those boulders, and no doubt she'd dull the edge of her blades trying to slice and dice a way through so much stone. She stood by and gave Chris a reassuring series of pats on the back. I didn't think much of it, but it appeared to calm the wyvern down, so I wasn't about to complain.

We lost about an hour digging our way through. I managed to seal up Chris' wound and stop the bleeding, but the psychological shock still had her in its grip. Throughout that whole time, Shoshanah managed to find remnants of the mechanism that caused the collapse, but was left baffled as to its construction and how it actually worked. It frustrated her to no end.

When we finally broke through to the other side, Ba'el climbed through and began marching forward on her own. We tried to stop her, but she stopped only to turn around and proclaim:

“If it ain't the work of gears and levers, then it's magical. I can detect that no problem if I put my head to it.”

The tone of impatience and frustration in her voice twisted the dagger already sticking out of Susan's back, and pride.

“We need to stick together, Ba'el!” I shouted back.

This time she fully stopped, offering me more than a passing glance.

“I'm sick of relying on miss do-gooder there. You watch! With my magic, I got this completely under—“

Schwing!

Two massive sharp blades of metal swung out behind Ba'el and closed like a pair of scissors a couple milometers above her head. Each blade swung out at anyone else's neck level and slammed into the wall. Sparks fizzled out in the space above her horns which barely scraped against the weathered metal at their tallest point before they turned back downward.

Ba'el stood frozen in place. Her claw pointing out toward me, her face stuck with her mouth still gaping. Whatever words she was about to speak next were caught in her throat. I watched as the corners of her mouth curved into a frown, her eyes empty of livelihood and her outstretched paw slowly drop down to her side. Finally, she sat down on the flat of her hooves, tucking her knees into her chest and curled up into a ball with her paws grabbing hold of her horns for dear life.

“B-ba'el? Are you alright?”

She didn't respond, nor so much as move.

Everyone, besides the still shell-shocked Chris, shared the same surprised look on their face. I was the first one to crawl over the space we had dug out of the debris and rush over to Ba'el's side. The tiny girl, much to her credit and current survival, didn't respond to any outside stimuli. Minte had followed close behind me... Real close, almost clinging onto me.

“Minte it's fine I'm—“

A blur streaked across my face. Had I been blinking, I would have missed it. When my eyes refocused, I noticed Minte standing at attention, motionless and as stoic as ever.

“Minte?”

Yes?”

“Was that you—?”

I needn't ask. All I had to do is look down and see a bundle of sticks tightly grasped in her right hand. Three long and thin shafts... with sinister pointed tips.

“—Where did you get those?”

Her eyes glanced over at the wall, where there were a

scattering of small holes I had not noticed before. I wavered on the spot when my knees went weak, but Minte acted quickly and held me still on the spot.

“Darts? From when?!”

“Now,” she answered. “Twenty meters back behind the blockage.... Hundred and forty behind that one.”

Then why wouldn't she have?... How did no one else notice?...

I give up.

The reality behind the danger that Hyria warned us about finally dawned on us. Rose's tempered excitement had washed away and a serious contemplative expression had settled on her face. Susan made her way through the gap next and went to work investigating the newest trap Ba'el had so blindly sprung. She cautiously tread her way across the stone floor to where the hinges of the blades were exposed.

“Alright. No one move, AT ALL,” I commanded.

But one person decided to not listen. Rose climbed over the small mound of leftover debris from the collapse.

“Ahhh, I think I get it now,” she said.

“Get what?” Susan fired back, her voice heavy with scepticism.

“Well, these traps are weird, right?”

An understatement. If Susan wasn't able to figure out how they worked, and Ba'el couldn't detect them if they worked by magic...

“Please, Rose,” Susan sighed. “Go collect the large and the tiny idiot. I shall endeavour to—“

“Nah, hear me out,” Rose said with a voice full of conviction.

It's enough to put Susan on her heels. Rose wasn't speaking in her usual flighty and her tone... fancy-free.

“I don't know anything about mechanisms, or magic, or traps... But if I think of them like ambushes... Then it's simple why they don't look like they make any sense.”

Susan, Minte and I kept our mouths shut and let her continue without objection.

“When your gonna stage an ambush, ya don't attack the front. Everyone's looking that way, facing that way. It's a bad idea. So that's why you trigger it from behind. They can either turn the whole thing around, or keep going forward, faster.”

Rose crossed her arms and tilted her head, her eyes narrowed and the gears inside her head straining to put her one of kind thought process into words.

“Like dropping a bunch of rocks onto a formation going through a path... Why drop em on the ones going in first? You get one, the others dig their way through. You block em from going anywhere, attack from behind? Big deal, their formation's still working... Nah. You drop it in the middle or at the end. Cut em in half, spread panic. Isolate a part and pick em off.”

Her head rocked over from one shoulder to the other as she continued.

“Firing a few arrows here and there don't do much but slow things down. Nothing but a skirmish, it doesn't decide anything... But the big scythes things... Why have the blade come out in front where someone can see it coming? It ain't much time, but it's some...”

Susan's eyes slowly began to open and her expression overtaken with shock and dread. I didn't know what she's thinking now, but I think it had to do with her figuring out exactly what Rose was thinking.

“You're not proposing—?” Susan's voice was quiet and shaken.

“Yeah. Traps are supposed to scare people. Make em give up and go back, right? Whittling down numbers is just a bonus. If that's so...”

I think I got it now too.

“Then all this facing the wrong way. It's not to keep us out. It's to keep things in.”

Chapter 93

Our situation got rather hectic before getting better. I witnessed firsthand our collective luck get stretched thin and near its breaking point and a couple of us had lost at least one of our nine lives. No one was seriously hurt, at least not permanently. How Chris manged to remain partially functional after having a roof dropped on her head scared me more than the thought there would be many more traps to come.

Thankfully, we eked out a revelation in return. It came from the most unexpected person to boot: Rose.

This whole time she had a skip to her step and a sweet melody humming in her breast, both activities taking up her whole attention span. But it ended up being her who picked out the missing piece of the puzzle. That was the answer to the question which kept Ba'el and Shoshanah scratching theirs heads. That would be how this onslaught of traps worked.

The solution seemed obvious in retrospect and that they were facing the wrong way. They were not designed in the most efficient way to keep us out, But rather to keep something in. In the end we traded a certain threat to a more mysterious and more terrifying one.

What were these traps trying to keep from getting out?

To save face, Shoshanah explained to me at length how spotting traps was three-fourths spotting subtle abnormalities and one-quarter getting inside the head of the designer; predicting where they would appear by where a trap would be most effective. Her paws waving back and forth in a flurry and sweat pouring down her forehead. Rose stood beside me with a smug smile plastered on her face and that appeared to be driving Susan rabid.

Minte had taken my place on patting Chris on the head, the giant of the girl still with her knees tucked into her chest and fighting back the last few tears her eyes had left to give. Meanwhile, Ba'el had shaken the shock out of her system and was inspecting the walls with a lit wooden pipe tumbling between her lips.

It's not the mechanisms she was interested in, rather, the magic involved within them. Whatever ancient mechanisms were involved, the ball lay within Susan's court of expertise, but the magic at work remained in Ba'el's. Yet that tiny demon had kept silent for the past hour an hour since coming to a stop.

"...Shit," came her telltale vulgarity at last; complete with a puffed ring of smoke.

"Beg your pardon?" I said, standing on my tiptoes to look over Susan and Rose now close to blows in front of me.

"Shhh!" She hissed through clenched teeth. "And turn off that damn staff," She said rudely pointing at Susan.

The corners of her lips peeled back and revealed her fangs for a second, but the priestess heaved a heavy sigh through her nose instead. She turned off the glowing orb inside her staff's keyhole. The illuminated halls dimmed and Rose's tail remained the sole enitity to push back the darkness. An eerie silence followed, the constant chime the light gave off became apparent only after it disappeared.

Ba'el pushed herself away from the wall and looked everywhere. Her eyes appearing to view far off in the distance beyond the mere stone in front of her.

"Ambiance," was the next solitary word to come out of her. "Dammit! Of course!"

The demon began clawing at the stone, etching out fresh white scars in the rock as she drew a magic circle. Partway through she turned to Rose next.

"Cut it off with the tail for a second."

Rose looked to me first and I shrugged back. She took one deep breath and held it in with puffed cheeks. The flame on her tail died down to a weak wisp after a few seconds . The remaining light in the tunnel slowly dimmed until there was barely anything at all besides Rose's silhouette and the rough shapes of all the others in the pitch black darkness. Nothing else existed except the scraping of Ba'el's claws on the stone wall.

No longer than a second after the scratches ended, the completed circle glowed a faint green.

"Immediately after completion?" Susan gasped.

Ba'el's profile illuminated by the cinders inside her pipe and the pale green light from the wall turn to face us. The girl raised her paws and shrugged her tiny shoulders; she had indeed done nothing more.

"It ain't glowing because I did anything."

"Which would mean?..." I asked

"We've been walking through a very weak magic field this whole time. Like a fog blinding us to the small stuff."

Susan approached the circle, and while she refused to touch it, inspected it closely.

"That's why we haven't sensed anything," Ba'el continued. "All these traps work on real subtle triggers. Nothing more than a couple runes or tiny circles. This whole field drowns em out."

I stepped forward and asked, "Someone, or something, is jamming us?"

"If it were only that, I'd be happy. No. This is worse. Way worse," Ba'el said while shaking the last few ashes from her pipe before stowing it away. "All this doesn't have a point of origin. It just is."

"Can you-"

I looked back to my right and saw Rose's face getting increasingly strained as she kept on holding her breath. Her tail flickered and spat a few stray embers in distress as well.

"I think that's enough Rose, thanks."

"Phhhwaw!" Came the sound of her lungs collapsing as a rush of air escaped Rose's lips.

A quick coughing fit later and her tail's flame soon roared back to its usual strength.

"Like I was going to say... Ba'el, can you put that in laymen terms?"

"Didn't I tell you all this before?" She groaned. "Whatever. It's like this: Magic and reality ain't the best of pals. They're like two totally different fabrics woven together... Something about how that's a bad thing in one the Church's holy books, right, whatever. See, magic is omnipresent. It's everywhere, but its anchored to this world in a certain way."

She stomped on the hard stone beneath her with her hoof for effect.

"Solid and real. Nothing strange, right? Well, there's countless little threads of mana weaving in and out of the earth. All over the place. There wouldn't be a thing called magic without em. And that would make this place more boring than heaven... But here? We got ourselves a genuine crap ton of threads all bundled together. All those little invisible threads weaving in and out all gathering to one spot and then spreading out all over again. We call this kind of phenomenon a leyline; a hub of em to be specific."

"An interesting theory," Shoshanah spoke, "But it fails to sufficiently explain the nature of the current radiating mana. If it were true that this were a leyline hub, the very history of this realm would be fundamentally-"

She suddenly gasped, grit down on her teeth all while her eyebrows knit together.

"Nuh-uh uh uh~!" Ba'el chuckled and wagged a finger in return. "We're not talking about no divine power here. This is good old fashioned mana here. You can put a stopper on top of that. But judging by your face I think that pretty little head of yours caught up with your big fat mouth."

"I said laymen, not talking in circles. Come on now," I protested.

"Sealed away," Minte spoke up, her voice delicate as glass.

"Ding ding ding! We have a winner" Ba'el applauded the assassin. "Bringing that score up during the lightning round."

"A weak radiance of mana..." Shoshanah mumbled. "Stifled, decentralized and stale."

"So all this used to be around before someone put a lid on it?" Rose asked.

"Tis the most logical conclusion," Shoshanah said. "A wealth of mana means wealth of magic for little cost to its user. There is definitely a correlation between the strength of past empires and their ability to exploit these locations worldwide."

That's not something Hyria mentioned when giving the details of this job. And I'd say it's a pretty big detail to omit. If this kind of power is common knowledge, would these catacombs remain

untouched after all these years? She might not have known. The job was simply to deliver an artifact back to an ancestral tomb. A way to honor the dead. Maybe appease a few of the dearly departed. After all, this old map and green crystal are likely as old as these tunnels.

"Wait. Shouldn't that mean you'd have more at your disposal?" I turned back and asked Ba'el.

A rush of air escaped her tiny nose. A disappointed sigh, preparing the speaker to dwell on something she would rather not talk about.

"It's dead," she said. "This ain't no freshly baked cookie smell, this is rotting corpse levels of stagnant. Like I said, a whole lotta noise and nothing else. That's why I didn't pick up on it till about now. This circuits of this circle here should be bright enough to lite the whole tunnel up."

And right now it didn't glow any brighter than some cheap dollar store glow-in-the-dark stickers.

So what I could gather is that this place used to be rife with magic. Something happened and it died. Saying that it was sealed off might be a better way to put it; but that led to asking why... The final word is that a type of magic waste is the only thing managing to seep out, like a kind of radiation. Since no one else panicked and ran for the exit I figured this wasn't some sort of bio-hazard... If it were, they'd make me deal with it on account of my magic resistance.

A look of unease and disgust settling on Ba'el and Susan's face made me realize that perhaps those sensitive to it felt a little differently.

"We should be okay now," Ba'el said reassuringly. "Just gotta keep an ear to the ground for a fart in the wind versus the usual hushed whisper in a library... Elementary stuff."

"It should be within my power to filter out a certain degree of this 'noise'," Susan said. "If I could be allowed but a few more minutes to make preparations. We are currently a few minutes behind schedule and—"

"ALRIGHT!" Chris loud booming voice pierced my eardrums.

We all turned to watch as Chris leaped back to her feet. Her body filled with energy, her chest bouncing, and a fire returned to her eyes. It even took Minte by surprise and she stumbled backward a few

steps.

"Looks like Chris finished rebooting," I said softly, but with a relieved smile.

"We can't wait around here forever, now can we?" Chris said, thumping her chest with her forearm talon. "Christophaclies is ready for action! It will take more than a few tons of falling stone to stop the forward march of JUSTICE. Long seal memories, forgotten souls wandering aimlessly. Histories abandoned and the dearly departed for too long unhonored by the living... No ancient death labyrinth can stop us from achieving our noble goal!"

"I thought we were doing this to get paid?" Rose whispered to me.

"We are," I whispered back. "But we got Chris back in action, so just roll with it for-"

"Come now, Tamerlion! Our mission remains yet incomplete!"

The next moment I got scooped off the ground by the waist and tucked underneath Chris' wing like a sack of potatoes. My flailing legs and yelp of surprise did nothing to stop the rampaging wyvern as she marched further down the tunnel with a heroic cackle of delight. My pleas turned to a scream when the floor gave way, but she merely strode across it with her exceptionally long legs and a powerful hop with the greatest of ease.

It took all the other girls about a minute before the first couple caught up and managed to grab onto her tail. It took about another minute to pull the girl to a stop before triggering anything more.

I didn't want to be caught up in her still dazed and crazy challenge of the maze's death traps which could still bounce right off her. Thankfully time cooled off her hotheadedness, but she was either playing dumb or she really did get hit hard in the head and forgot completely what she had just done. I decided I'd need to keep an extra careful eye on her for a bit.

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Our journey continued further into the depths and the heat buried within the earth became evermore extreme. A tepid dozen or so degrees quickly became two dozen and then a sweltering summer's

day. We had to be reaching a couple or more kilometers beneath the surface. If that were true, we were making more progress than it seemed. Then again, the surroundings hardly changed because they were so similar that it made it difficult to judge just how far we had walked. I long ago stopped counting the number of steps we took, so I couldn't translate it into distance.

The vast array of traps that were meant to bring a sudden end to any escapees (or trespassers) posed little threat now. Ba'el and Susan somehow managed to work together well enough to detect them before one of us triggered one. After a few more close calls they ceased to slow us down at all and avoiding the obvious pitfalls became routine. That didn't stop Minte from gluing herself to me though. Rose walked alongside me on the right while Chris took up a wall-like position behind us all.

But these endless hallways and their catastrophic twists and turns were doomed to end. The vast crypt transformed into a vast cavern. Besides a ridge wide enough to walk three across, enough for a funeral procession I'm sure, the tunnel opened into a chasm that no light in our possession could find the bottom of. The roof stretched up about one hundred meters up into a sea of stalactites. Each spike of rock was so long that it must have taken several hundreds of years to erode.

I could not help but drop my jaw at the sight. Rose's flame could hardly pierce the darkness and Susan's light could not travel too far before being swallowed by the darkness below. Mighty pillars of stone reached up from that darkness and held the eroding ceiling above in place. Occasionally the far side of the chasm was visible and I could make out other ridges like the one below my feet right now. From there countless other entrances to other parts of the great maze twisted and turned behind walls of earth.

"At last!" Chris groaned as she stretched her wings to their fullest extent.

Without a moment of hesitation she walked over to the edge and let her body free fall over the side. Her wings caught the stale air and the echo of her leathery membranes thundered off the cavern walls. She soared high and low, grabbing onto the pillars to look around before pushing off to taking flight once more. She acted as a scout while enjoying her refound freedom. The look of bliss on her face got me thinking that her instability might have to do with a repressed case of minor claustrophobia.

Other than the occasional flare up of bickering our party made good progress until we found a suitable alcove along the precarious ridge path. This would be the end of our second day and the next would be the final day we had the necessary supplies for. Any longer and we'd start running out of food. There were the occasional patches of grotesque lichen clinging to the rocks, and a few mushrooms with worrisome bio luminescence, but I'd rather not be reduced to being poisoned by either.

Susan assured me in the final moments before we laid down to rest that we'd make it to the location marked out on the map by midday tomorrow. I hoped that was so, because I felt stricken by a feeling of unease that got worse and worse the further we traveled the underground canyon. Maybe it's my bad luck with them; the last time I ran through the last I got sent tumbling down a stone chimney.

This uncomfortable gut feeling for worse when seeing Ba'el's troubled expression after a series of constant experiments. At the camp she scratched one magic circle into the stone after another. Every time she did so the faint glow of light got stronger and stronger the further into the underground we got.

That night my sleep remained dreamless, something I saw as another ill omen. Yet I could not allow myself to be deterred and the following morning I steeled myself to venture onward.

My demeanor did not appear to be shared by the others, so I kept my thoughts to myself. Rose remained as bombastic as ever. Fantasies of riches and adventure that were before and all around us pushed her onward. Susan and Ba'el had stern expressions as they dwell on the mysteries and hidden threats. Chris took her work very seriously and wore her usual heroic expression on her face. Minte remained close, the stoney expression on her face had a tinge of worry since she was intent on reading my own expressions. I waived her worries, but she persisted.

The last leg of our journey took us further along the chasm. Ba'el's impromptu circles continued to grow stronger and Chris flew back with news that the cavern dripped off sharply ahead and came to an end. Susan beamed and proclaimed that this agreed with the map. She gave herself a few figurative pats on the back and we set off to our final destination.

One last treat of winding corridors and an unusual

concentration of lethal traps blocked our path and set us two hours behind schedule, but after descending a long spiral stairwell, like a tower stabbing into the heart of the earth, we entered one long lost and forgotten chamber. The sight of it took my breath away.

Ancient columns, lined in two parallel rows, the entrance to a Hellenic-like temple. They did not reach the ceiling which stood about thirty meters high and some were broken, their top halves collapsed onto the smooth stone floor beneath. Time had not been kind and many of those smooth tiles had been cracked and clawed at by the ravages of erosion. Eons had labored hard to tear this place down, but most of it seemed to have escaped any serious harm.

A true archeologist would likely be brought to tears to lay their eyes on this place. Scrawling marks on the wall detailed some long lost history. Gashes in the walls had long since robbed them of having any meaning, but remnants of the care and precision that went into what few runes remained. They cut paths along the floor, walls and ceiling to the array of stone alters. There were six of them in total, with one large one located at the far end of the column pathway.

As we walked I noticed our footprints in the dust. There had never been so much dust spread so thinly over an entire room like this until now. Large conical piles ancient of bone ash had been all there was before. They gathered in zen circles around a series of sarcophagi. That's what were placed atop every alter. I did not notice it at a distance, but in the shadow of Rose's flame and Susan's light... I could not describe them as anything else.

And within that light came the glistening of silver and gold. Rose and Ba'el's eyes lit up with child-like glee at the sight. Jewelry, stacks of coins and pottery that contained them. They rest beside the weathered old staffs of wood that were likewise ornate. A small fortune had remained untouched here for countless years and there hadn't been so much as a door to seal it away. Thinking back on the complexity of the labyrinth behind us though... It didn't seem too far a stretch that anyone without a map could spend a lifetime investigating every crevice from the entrance down and fail to document it all. And that's if they survive the array of deadly traps.

I followed behind Susan who followed the last minute details scrawled on the map and we stopped at the end of the long chamber. Rising above us both was the largest alter of them all. One sarcophagus, larger than the others, rest atop a hill of thirty stone steps. Unlit candles made long dead taxiways to the top. Yet after all

these years, the candles lit as Susan's wisp of light passed them by. They appeared nothing more than wax candles, but they had somehow survived and remained undisturbed since the day someone placed them there.

"We have at last reached our destination," Susan said while expertly folding the oversized map and stowing it away.

"Phew! That was quite the stroll," Rose said while stretching herself out.

"Finders Keepers time," Ba'el announced and made herself busy skulking around the room.

"Hey! Did thou forget what was agreed upon?" Susan shouted back.

"Relax, relax," Rose said with a smile. Only anything out of place, right?"

The priestess was going to protest, but couldn't get the words out after Rose slapped her hard on the back a few times and knocked the wind out of her.

"No stealing from the dead. But can't help it if someone left something nice just laying around, right?"

"We could always take it for archeological purposes..." Chris mused.

"Absolutely not!" Susan cried after a short coughing fit. "Laven, please commence with the ritual. Before any of these thick skull ruffians have their way with this holy site!"

"Alright alright," I said backing away from the upset anubis.

But I wasn't exactly sure what to do... A good first step would have to do the crystal though, right?

I began climbing the stairs, guided on each side by the unnatural candlelight. Every step I ascended made my stomach drop a little lower in my torso as the air felt heavier with each step I took. And I took each of those steps alone. Susan watched apprehensively from below along with Minte, but the other three had gone off around the room below me to investigate the rest of the room. Chris and Rose eyed the riches on display with no doubt glistening eyes. Ba'el,

meanwhile, took a rather uncharacteristic turn and was drawn to the runes and patterns on the wall.

My eyes peeled away from the girls as I reached the top of the steps and placed my hands on the alter. I missed a beat in my heart at the sight of bones in what turned out to be an open sarcophagus. It was a nearly complete skeleton too. A good deal of it seemed to have been reduced to dust, but its skull, most of its ribcage and a few of the larger bones in the arms and legs remained intact. Someone had draped it in a dusky grey mortcloth long ago. How intact that cloth was after all this time, with but a few tatters here and there, is extraordinary.

That skull definitely appeared to be in mint condition. Bleach white and completely untouched by time itself. Not even the jaw and teeth had been lost or damaged. Given its shape, and from what bones remained, I'd hazard a guess that these bones once belonged to a woman. Alongside all the dreary greys, whites and darkness was a singular red ruby lodged in the skull's right eye-socket. My eyes were continuously drawn to it. Glass-like, perfectly round and masterfully cut. Maybe it's some luxurious glass eye?

I called back down to explain what I had found.

"Tis that location in particular that the map details," Susan responded back. "Offer the crystal in this Hyria's stead. Then offer a brief prayer to the departed."

"Oi! Suzie!" Ba'el called out from the darkness.

"Don't call me that!" Suzie barked back

"Come and take a look at this and tell me what ya think," the demon continued unapologetically.

The priestess stormed off before I could ask her another question. That left me alone with the green crystal in one hand and the ancient bones resting peacefully before me.

"Do... Do I just place the crystal inside and—?"

I reached out with the crystal in hand to drop it inside the sarcophagus when the granules of dust were pushed way in circular patterns upon the crystal's approach. I pulled back instinctively and the motion of the dust stopped. Each grain had moved as if repulsed by the crystal like iron shavings from a magnet. And that revealed a dip in

the bottom of the sarcophagus. It's located betwixt the ribcage; dead-centre of the chest where the heart would be. The circumference of the hole which was not quite circular and matched the hexagonal edges of the crystal appeared to be a perfect match.

My breathing had become ragged at some point. I swallowed a dry mouthful and reached out with the crystal once more. More the dust gave way, but I could reach trough the ribcage and insert the crystal. This time though, the remains themselves shook and the glass ruby eyes quivered and hopped out of its socket. I panicked and managed to catch it in my other hand before it landed. The sphere was ice cold to the touch. It actually hurt a little to hold it at first.

A sigh of relief escaped pursed lips. I breathed a few crisp breaths through clenched teeth and readied myself again; third time had to be the charm. I would return the ruby after securing the crystal, so I thought. This time I reached out and stabbed it into the opening before anything else could get the chance to break. The crystal's contact with the stone sarcophagus let out a disinterested ring of a struck tuning fork, but nothing reacted this time. In all its green glory, the object had been delivered at last and safely... Mostly.

I looked down at the ruby in my hands. It was the perfect size to mimic a human eye. The thing is quite the impressive hedron; there had to be at least a hundred sides to it which gave it a near perfect round shape. This ruby had to be worth even more than the green crystal, but for now I'd have to return it. After all, that's the agreement which Susan laid out. Someone had kept that ruby there for a reason. A quick prayer to the dead and that should be everything we need to—

"Laven stop!”
"Laven halt!”

Susan and Ba'el both cried at the same time at the base of the stairs.

I turned to face them with the one dumbfounded word I could muster: "What?”

Looking back had been a bad choice. That meant I had to acknowledge the lines of green etching their way down the grooves in the stonework from the alter and down toward to the floor.

"Dammit!” Ba'el yelled.

The five girls had gathered and closed in together, now all back

to back, as the green surged across the room. All those old half ruined runes along the room radiated a sharp green colour in all their ancient glory. A quiet screeching became louder and the whole room began to shake. The green lines covering the whole room and flooding the room with light flashed a blood red for a moment before quickly turning to a sharp yellow. A shower of sparks erupted from one rune after another. Sparks that acted more like broken shards of glass rained down across the room.

A powerful wind appeared form nowhere and the candlelight which had also been glowing that distinct shade of yellow were extinguished. As suddenly as it began, the chaos ended and the room went dark except for Rose's tail. But not even that lasted long, because the candles relit soon after the wind died without warning. Amidst the silence came the sound of chattering bone. Before my dead could turn to face the sarcophagus behind me, clouds of dust were crawling up the stairs and pouring collecting inside it.

I did finally force myself to turn around and I was face to face with the skull which now floated above the sarcophagus. The shock of the sight had me stumble down a step, but I would be treated to more soon enough. Other bones from within arranged themselves below the skull and the dust swirled around an ever reassembling corpse. A complete spine rebuilt itself within seconds from dust. The ribcage healed next and the hips, legs and arms came next. By the time I managed to retreat five steps down, the skeleton was complete.

Next came the mortcloth which wrapped itself around the skeleton and served as a cloak. It did nothing to stop the incessant flow of dust from flowing in toward the face, arm holes and skirt bottom. Pale grey flesh clung to the bones and made withered mummified flesh from a horrific mask of the death to the tips of withered old toes.

A mummified corpse it would not remain. From clouds of dust came hydration that filled the skin with life; although its skin color remained a dead pale grey. A dusty marble-like and shapely form of a young woman filled out and the mortcloth pushed out substantially from the best. Long scraggly strands of old white hair reaching down to the shoulders and collarbone smoothed out and regained life as a light blue crept up each strand from root to tip. Any trace of a corpse had vanished. Replaced by the form of a young, short but immodestly endowed woman. So too was she hardly dressed, the blackened and tattered cloak clinging barely to her, as though it had a mind of its own and an intent to tease.

Last came the intricate tattoos reminiscent of magic circuits along her biceps and thighs. They glowed a radiant red before dulling to a darker shade of bluish-grey. The ritual of resurrection completed, her body gracefully touched down onto the highest step before the sarcophagus.

With a sickening squelch her eyes opened; one with iris of hazel, the other with nothing but an empty black hole. Despite how long she must have been left here undisturbed, sleep deprived bags hung under her hooded shaped eyes. Thin eyebrows and a delicate jawline frame her face along with a small slightly upturned nose Her cold lifeless eye quickly glared down at me and a menacing pressure pushed me backward a couple more steps.

Even I could feel the crackling of power emanating from her and the room began to shake once more.

Chapter 94

A mighty tremor shook the crypt and the quaking earth brought down a hail of dust. The ground protested, but a latticework of cracks running along the room's circumference stirred to life. Previously dark corners of the room now glowed a pale blue and grew stronger each second. These continued to pulse like a heartbeat while a strange wind whipped up a storm of dust and debris. I had to cover my eyes from the sting of particles.

Power was carried within those glowing cracks. Each ran like a river; countless streams and tributaries collecting together into thick bands which carried the light directly to the central altar. They reminded me of electrical circuits, and like electricity, the power affected the dust cloud. Bluish particles of light bent the haze of dust to and fro until I swear my eyes could see field lines form. These lines were thicker than the cloud engulfing them and I watched as they wavered around the primary suspect of all this: the reanimated corpse.

What were once skeletal remains reanimated into the form of a young woman. Her skin, however, retained a deathly grey colour. What's more she levitated above me while peering out from the hood with one good eye, likewise grey and devoid of life. A chill air billowed down from her bare and dangling toes. That air moved like as invisible fog, swept over the row upon row of lit candles and turned the flames an eerie blue as they passed.

Her position a meter above her sarcophagus remained steady in the eye of the storm until the cloud of dust got pushed back by a sudden wave of pressure. Every last mote vanished and the reborn form of the woman before me had been completed. Behind me I could hear the girls hissing and bickering between clenched teeth.

“You were all struttin' 'round like the room was clean!” Rose said.

“It is!... was!” Susan growled.

“Don't look at me!” Ba'el shouted.

“Master! Oi, Master! Tell her we come in peace!” Came Chris' suggestion bellowed above the bickering of the others.

Their bickering continued as they tried to shuffle into position and argued over one another. That left me all alone with the mysterious new arrival... Or should I say she had always been here? I

noticed her eye had peeled itself off of me and locked onto its next target: the red gemstone clenched tightly in my hand. Which is odd, because she shouldn't be able to see it with my hand in the way like it is now.

A diplomatic approach, as Chris suggested, would likely be the best course of action here. I raised my hands above my head in a gesture of non-confrontation.

"We're not grave robbers. We've come to—"

The woman's eye followed the hand I had the gem hidden in and she seemed rather disinterested and detached from everything I was saying. I might as well be still talking to the corpse. I unfurled my hands and exposed the gem between index and middle finger of my right hand. After all, trying to put my hands up like that while still clenching something isn't really the proper way to do things.

"I didn't take it. It—it popped right out of your— skull. I was just holding onto it... To make sure it didn't—"

An icy chill scrapped by my fingers as something invisible lashed out with whip-like quickness. My hand instinctively clenched tight, but the gem had already been plucked from my grip. It floated in the eye, rotating on its axis in front of me before being reeled back toward the woman. Some sort of telekinesis or something snatched it away.

"Damn it— Laven!" Ba'el screamed.

The living corpse wasted no time and the gem flew backward and directly into her gaping eye socket. A sickening squelch echoed outward and her eyelids descended for the first time. Her first act concluded and her second resumed immediately when they flew back open. Beside the dull grey eye lay an eye with a blood red iris. The full weight of her piercing glare burrowed into me chest. A cold oppressive malaise got quickly replaced with threatening glare. A screeching whine built up behind her red eye which sparkled and glowed before letting loose with a radiant flash.

I brought my arms down in vain attempt to shield my eyes, but it was a hook snagging around my chest from behind which saved me from the danger. As my limp body flew backward, a blinding flash of red light shot out in a beam as wide as my bridged thumb and index finger. That beam vaporized the ground where I had stood. A scatter-shot of debris exploded from the point of impact. A molten patch of

slag rock is all that remained after the laser missed its mark.

Meanwhile, I kept falling backward and it wasn't by force of gravity. The force pulling me is much too fast to be that; I'm going in a straight line too. Before the inevitable impact with the ground I heard Shoshanah say in a rather resigned voice:

“I should have thought this throug—”

I hit something far softer than ground. My momentum kept me going for another few meters, but this time with a passenger. Shoshanah and I tumbled and landed together in one big heap. I felt sore and struggled to unravel my limbs from hers while there were spirals in her eyes and no double stars dancing around her head. At least she ended up on top of me, the guilt of seeing her banged up had been assuaged... a little. With a bit of telekinesis of her own, the priestess had grabbed me from below in the nick of time at her expense.

“Coming in peace has failed!” Rose shouted, letting loose with her battle.

She drew the sword from behind her back and the girls followed suit by lowering their centre to face the threat. But it wasn't a battle that was about to start. It's a one-sided onslaught.

“Scatter!” Ba'el screamed back while shoving the salamander out of the way.

Ba'el dove after her while the latter got sent flying. The petite demon's unexpected show of strength from Rose's blind spot caught the warrior off guard. Both girls ended up behind the safety of a nearby column which must have been Ba'el intent.

Chris and Minte sensed the immediate threat better than Rose and scattered in the opposite direction. I watched it all from my vantage point that was still many meters behind them. My line of sight still had the beam slinging corpse dead and centre too. Her eye drew energy toward it in the form of little blue orbs of light. Once concentrated, it shot off in another ray of red light. This time it raked left to right in an arc across the floor. Stone tiles were vaporized on contact and rocky shrapnel whizzed through the air where the girls had been gathered two seconds ago.

That left Susan and myself in the open. And as if on cue, the woman above the altar turned her head slowly toward us. It's very

much like a robot calculating we were both the biggest threat with currently the highest probability of killing. There wasn't so much as a moment of hesitation nor refraction period between the previous blast and the one building up now. Dozens of little ethereal balls of blue light were vacuumed from the previously empty ether and into the corpse's eye.

I had little time to act, so I rolled out from underneath Susan and scooped her up in my arms. The brief moment where she was relatively quiet from being knocked senseless ended no differently than splashing her with a bucket of cold water... Except that she went beat red enough that freezing water would have turned to steam. I cared not what I grabbed onto, or how hard. My arms grabbed hold tight and my legs did their duty. My leap had no running start as I outran the beam of light that tore up the ground from behind. One hop and a leap and I rolled into my own cover behind the safety of another altar.

With my back to the altar, and sitting on the ground, Susan sat crosswise on my lap with her paws still wrapped around me neck. Her protests stopped and she peeked around the corner at the corpse and to check on the other girls.

“So what's the plan now?” I shouted.

“Hold on a second!” Rose replied.

Rose scooped up a rather large hunk of stoney debris beside her and threw it out into the open. It flew for a few meters, but a red flash of light vaporized it at the moment before it was to complete its arc through the air.

“Well, that narrows down a lot of options...” she said with dry wit.

“Forget that,” Susan said. “We shall make tactical retreat to the exit. Our objective is complete. We should care little for—”

VREEEM

Another ray of light shot past us all and slammed into the rock above the entrance to the room. It scrapped along and brought down a massive pile of debris and blocked the exit with a few tons of limestone.

“She can hear us,” Minte said, casually.

“I realized!” Susan barked back.

“We can dig out way out, but not under fire,” I said in a vain attempt to keep things on a productive note.

“Maybe if someone hadn't given back her power source,” Ba'el seethed, “Maybe we wouldn't be worrying about either right now!”

“I didn't give it back. She took it!”

“When you present yourself like that, don't blame yourself when someone takes what they want!”

“Friends,” Chris spoke, but was ignored.

“What does it matter, demon?” Susan yelled back.

“That's her phylactery. The source of her power. You break that and our problem is solved.”

“Guys!” Chris yelled a little louder than before.

“Really? That's all?” Rose asked.

“Look... There's more than one way to skin a cat, and there's more than one way for a wizard to achieve immortality.”

“If she doth insist on wasting what power she has, we need only wait until she has expended her mana reserves,” Susan said.

“And that is what I was gonna bring up before. She doesn't have a reserve. She has the whole dammed reservoir!”

“You are not suggesting—“

“HEY!” Chris screamed.

Everyone finally turned to the wyvern who struggled to keep her large frame hidden behind a pillar.

“If she can hear us, that means she pretty much knows where we are, right?”

We all paused and our eyes then from Chris up to the ceiling where a glowing orb of white light had gathered silently. It spun in place like a disco ball. Meanwhile, mana gathered in the corpse's eye. The glow was brighter and more fierce than the others so far.

While still of one mind, the lot of us scrambled to flee our cover. Not a moment later, the next blast shot out from the wizardess' eye. It struck the orb and split the beam into a rain of countless smaller beams. They struck the ground like bullets around where we were hidden before. The ancient columns couldn't withstand the onslaught and were reduced to stone splinters and dust.

Susan broke free at last and we were once again in the open. But it ended up being the same thing for each of us. No cover was going to buy us any time if the corpse woman could so easily fire upon us at any angle she desired.

“I'm going on!” Rose said, renewing her battle cry.

“Not dead on! What are you thinking?” Ba'el shouted after the salamander after failing to grab hold of her.

Rose held her sword in front to act as a shield while charging headlong toward the stairs to the main altar. Ba'el tried to follow after her, but her little legs were too slow to catch up. I scanned the room to see Chris and Minte exchanging glances, hand signals and a few words. Beside me, Susan studied the whole scene from a distance. Her eyes had a keen analytical sheen. The last of the stars in her vision from our previous impact were gone. I wasn't sure if there would be enough time to come up with any sort of plan though.

“Don't go chargin' a wizard with any old sword!” Ba'el shouted after Rose.

The demon came to a skidding halt when the wizardess' eye shone brightly once More this time it fixed on Rose as its target. With an air sundering screech to herald its arrival, the blast followed. Rose's charge came to a halt as she dug her talons into the broken stone pavement. Her sword, my old sword, she angled it at forty-five degrees in front of her, one claw on the hilt and the other holding onto it further down the blade. I watched as the beam of light crashed into the steel, the sword bent inward from the force of the blast... But it didn't break.

Given the angle of the sword, and its resilience, the light reflected off in many directions. Just as it had done so with the disco ball before, the majority of it went harmlessly toward the ceiling which absorbed the energy of the attack. Rose's sword remained intact after the last of the power behind the wizardess' beam was spent. Her sword glowed red hot with a patch of white on the point of impact, but the excess heat quickly drained from the blade from tip to hilt.

“What in the hells?” Ba'el stammered. “That thing doesn't have any magical power in it!”

Rose spun the sword with a few twists of her wrist. Embers escaped the edges of the blade and left arcs of fire where it passed.

“It has passion!” Rose declared with her chest puffed out.

I hid my face in embarrassment. Ba'el scowled suspiciously. The corpse's face contorted for the first time with a knitting of her eyebrows. Rose responded by exploding into action. Her tail's flame erupted and grew twice the size as she bounded up the stairs by two and sometimes three steps at a time.

But her target was not unprepared.

Now, for the first time, blue tinted magic circles formed all around the wizardess and danced around her in a flurry of activity. Whatever beam hit before had some sort of instant cast time, but this had at least a quick cast time. Every circle combined into a long barrel made of successive circles and front the muzzle came a blast of chilling wind. A cone of cold with the power of a hurricane blasted full force at Rose who was forced dead in her tracks. The air itself froze, invisible water vapor became snowflakes and the arctic gale assailed Rose without mercy.

Rose's tail flickered and sputtered under the onslaught and the salamander grit her teeth and focused on keeping her own tail burning bright. Yet every second that passed consumed more of her seemingly boundless life-force. Her talons dug into the stone steps as she tried desperately to not be blown clear off the altar. A layer of frost quickly became a snowbank that sought to bury Rose alive. Her long thorny locks of hair glazed over with a layer of frost, but she continued to hold one arm definitely against the freezing hail.

A flutter from above met the sound of the howling cone of cold. Chris had leapt high above near the ceiling of the room and hovered in place with each beat of her wings. Her cheeks were puffed out and her chest bulging. She let loose with her own cone of fire and breathed a hell-storm on top of the caster's spell. Cold and hot air clashed, but the stream of cold wing got cut in half. Rose only needed the few seconds given to her in order to explode once more and shatter the frost off of her.

Charging through Chris' fire without hesitation, Rose emerged

from the other side unscathed. Her sword was now encased in a sheath of fire as it glowed white hot. She raised it high above her head, the sword leaving behind a streak of fire in the air wherever it went, and brought the edge down upon the spell casting corpse. A sound of steel on glass created a deafening ping, but I heard no break nor crack of flesh or bone. A blue aura surrounding the wizardess became visible along with the gash of red hot flame, but Rose had not broken through.

Yet the warrior did not despair. A cocky smile glared up at the floating corpse whose expression now revealed her teeth in a furious scowl. And that is the moment the sound of breaking glass and rending flesh rang out. Two green scimitars shot out from the greyish flesh and cut through the black cloth wrapped around her. They pierced through right under the breasts on each side of her chest, the place where her lungs would be. Minte materialized behind from behind at the end of flash step with each of her arm blades were swung into their offensive position.

“Shit,” Ba'el spat. “Not good enough, get out!”

I had no idea what the old goat was talking about, but a second look back at Minte allowed it to slowly sink in. Minte's eyes where open with surprise and Rose cocky smile quickly settled back to neutral. The floating corpse seemed unperturbed. Unamused. A rush of blue mana orbs rushed into her body from every angle much faster than before.

There was no magic circles and no grace to what happened next. Pure magic exploded out from the wizardess' aura. It rocked the entire room like the concussive wave from an explosion. I caught a glimpse of the wave before I heard it, when it hit me. Minte got thrown backward scimitars and all. Her wings did no good to slow or redirect her being carried by the wave of magic as it slammed her into the rear wall. Rose was thrown down the stairs and rolled down the many steps. When the wave hit Chris, who was still airborne, the resulting turbulence threw her to the ground as well.

Ba'el managed to stand her ground when the wave passed over her. Her hooves slid back about a meter, but hardly affected her at all. It hit me like a truck. It knocked me off my feet and sent me tumbling backward. I watched as Susan braced herself with a magic barrier of her own. Her face contorted in pain from the mental strain, but she remained completely unmoved.

“Laven!” She cried out when looking back at me being reduced to a rag-doll.

I pulled myself off the ground and gave her a wave of my hand to show her that I was okay. A little bruising is the worst I got from that. What worried me more is what happened to the other girls and how that one combination attack failed.

“What's the deal? Minte got two clean hits?”

“Minte failed to strike her heart,” Susan said. “She intended for her blades to pierce the mana barrier at the same point. They were deflected on initial contact with the barrier's out layer.”

So Minte joined her arms together and hoped to push through straight, but split far enough apart to miss her heart and go right trough on each side.

“LIKE I WAS TRYING TO SAY—” Ba'el raised her voice. “That wouldn't do any good.”

Susan and I both looked at the demon, dumbstruck.

“You can smash a zombie's head in, sure. You can stake a vampire's heart, that's cool. But none of that will stop a lich in its tracks.”

“Nonsense!” Susan barked back. “One may tie the spirit to the body, but should that tether to this mortal plane be severed or destroyed—“

“They ain't tethered by the body. That body is just for show. A lich ties its body here by the phylactery. It's soul, its everything, is right there in that little red gem.”

Shoshanah look mortified. More so than when she was told they were cremating the bodies throughout the crypt.

“But that's—“

“You know more about the unliving than I do, sure,” Ba'el replied cooly. “But trust me on this one... Doing that to your soul is a real foul act. It ain't one done lightly and it ain't one done by some amateur neither. If you wanna stop her, we're gonna have to get our hands back on that eye of hers.”

I looked for Rose and found her struggling to get back onto her feet. She was coming down from the adrenaline rush and trying to

reignite her flame back to what it was. Rose had no doubt used a great deal of energy in that last attack. Chris remained in better shape, but she knew better than to rush back into action. She quietly made her way over to Rose and began to dethaw her with what little flame she has left in her lungs. But at the pace they are going...

“Hey, Laven!” Ba'el called me out then tossed a small bag filled with what appeared to be looted silver. “I can do better. Hold that and watch this... And if it doesn't work, you'd better think of something, princess.”

While the other three girls were licking their wounds, Ba'el strolled up to the bottom of the altar and that act alone gained the attention of the lich. She rolled her shoulders and exhaled deeply.

“If I had any word of warning I'd give in hindsight, it'd be that one of the classic blunders is fighting a wizard in his workshop. And ya did a good job here. Tapping right into the leyline, huh? I'm not sure how ya did it to be honest. But your a thousand years too early to win a pissing contest against the likes of me!”

“Tis insane,” Susan growled.

“More so than usual?” I quipped.

I cautiously made my way back and stood beside Susan and we watched the demon march off to battle.

“Verily. If what we discovered prior to this being's awakening is so, and I am assuming the demon is acting in such a way that she believe it is true... The entirety of this crypt is a conduit upon which this lich is siphoning off into her own reserves of magic power.”

“That doesn't sound like something you'd build a crypt fore.”

“No. Tis more of a laboratory.”

“To experiment with what?”

Susan did not respond to that. She instead carefully watched the showdown between the lich and baphomet. They sized one another up with itchy trigger fingers. Both would have enough time to pick one spell from their repertoire, but neither seemed to know right away which it would be.

Recovering in the wings were Rose, Chris and Minte. Rose was

still feeling the chill and her tail sputtered occasionally, but managed to get back onto her feet. Chris appeared weary to take back to the air above since the winds the lich could cook up in such a small space is very much a tempest in a teapot. That no doubt made the winds far too unpredictable with turbulence that made flight impossible. Minte had peeled herself off the wall, but had yet to orientate herself. I watched her antenna twist in random directions as she struggled on shaking knees to prop herself up on the wall she had left a small crater in.

Getting caught in the ensuing crossfire would likely prove rather harmful too.

"There is only so much either can channel into a single spell," Susan said. "Her barrier is not impenetrable, as Minte demonstrated, but this lich's reserves of mana are bound to be bottomless. Ba'el has but one chance to choose wisely and achieve victory in one strike. Failure will no doubt leave her spent and her enemy granted a quick recovery."

And the air became electrified. Blue colored magic circles returned to orbit around the lich. A red magic pentagram grew beneath Ba'el's hooves and began a slow saw like spin. Her twintails began to dance and flick in the winds of magic energy being both gathered and emitted. The lich's cloak fluttered in the not so gentle breeze.

On Ba'el's forehead a strange light glowed. It was not the pentagram brand, but a small pillar of light that grew out between her horns. The thing looked like a torch with a bright flame burning atop it, but the whole object was incorporeal. What it did have is an immense amount of power building up within it. It almost looked like a whole other horn.

She opened her clenched paws and two other pentagrams sprung into existence and began spinning in her palms. Meanwhile, the magic circles formed an arc behind the lich. I could not begin to decipher the method to their movements or the meanings behind the runes inscribed in light. What I could understand is that the last ounces of magic power were being refined. What has taken almost twenty seconds will be released soon and the outcome to the duel will take but a fraction of a second.

I could only watch her tiny back, so I could not see the expression on her face, but the Lich's expression was the same as always: cold, calculating and devoid of any emotion. There was no boast or provocation. What worried me was the lack of either from

Ba'el.

And the exchange of fire happened so very quickly. Each of the twelves magic circles fanned out like a halo behind the Lich fired toward a center point just in front of the Lich before shooting out straight and down at the baphomet. To put a word to it: annihilation. The very air itself sounded as if it were screaming. Molecules of air were vaporized on contact. An oncoming scent of fresh ozone washed over us before the beam itself.

Ba'el's retaliation came from the flame above her head. She clenched her paws shut and the flame flashed bright. A triangle of light formed with the other two corners originating from the crowning curve of her horns The pentagram beneath her feet shattered into smaller triangles which flew across the ground at great speed before they disappeared, but they left behind an orange-red beam of light racing upward toward the lich. It met the beam of blueish-white head on, and kept going.

The lich's beam hit the vanguard of Ba'el's beam like a prism and scattered in all directions. Wherever the stray rays hit, the stone became not dust, but ash. Molten pools were left behind and we were lucky none of them curved back behind her to hit us. The other girls were forced further back, but thankfully beyond the range of the biggest ones with the most power behind them. But the lich had nowhere to run and her eyes shot open wide. Her figure vanished behind the impact of Ba'el's attack against her magic barrier's outer layers and the resulting explosion rocked and obscured the whole altar.

I had to avert my eyes from the flash and looked back only when a few stray bolts of lightning were racing along a black cloud of smoke obscuring the target. Any celebrations were cut short when Ba'el's little legs gave out from under her and she collapsed butt first onto the floor. Her chest heaved up and down and her voice was raspy and dry.

“And that's why... you should remember your geometry. These days it seems to be a lost art in death rays. But... But I... I guess I don't have as much in me as I used to...”

She struggled to get back onto her hooves and had to keep her upper body supported with paws on her knees.

“—Fuck.”

That's the last word she managed to get out before a piece of floor shaped exactly like a firewood log shot out from the ground like a bullet slammed into Ba'el's chest and sent her limp body flying over my head, through a pillar and slammed against a second that she slid down onto the floor.

Looking back was a compulsion I dreaded, but I could not help it and set my eyes back on the lich who besides a briefly faltering magic barrier looked no less for wear. Her expression looked less disinterested and more stern than before, but it is far from enough.

“Plan B has failed! Back to plan A!” I heard Rose shout.

And she tried to rejoin the fray, but ran face first into some invisible barrier. That barrier glowed a pale sickly green on the point of impact and a ripple ran along it from floor to ceiling. Chris followed suit with a shoulder first, but her whole body came to a complete stop on impact. Another ripple washed over an invisible wall like before. Minte struck at an identical wall in front of herself as well, but could not pierce it with her blades. All three had been locked away behind some impenetrable barrier. But when did that—?

No matter how many times the three girls struck out against the walls, they refused to give way or show any sign of damage. It's as if they were completely immune from any earthly form of damage.

And then there were two, but it didn't appear as if the lich was done with the demon yet. From her vantage point she pointed a single finger above Susan I. She aimed her finger at Ba'el and no doubt had intent on finishing her off.

“Magic circuit on an alternating prime number logarithm, factoring on—“

Susan was mumbling something beside me. I noticed now that the whole time she had ignored the flashy show and kept keen on studying the lich's magic. So when the lich raised her finger and prepared to fire her third spell, the effect fizzled out. Rather, it didn't happen at all. Shoshanah had her staff back in paw and pointing the ankh toward the lich. Her teeth were gritting together and her face looked full of strain while she continued to mumble to herself.

Slowly, robotically, the lich's head swivelled to face Susan. A cold inquisitiveness was plastered on her face. Her first response to power up her eye once again, but that too sputtered and the red glow of her eye returned to a dull listless state. Susan let loose a long

exhaling groan along with her a heave of her shoulders.

“Susan?”

“I shall hold her attention for as long as I am able... You need to find a means to interfere with the walls of force that have bound the others.”

“You got a hint on that?”

“None.”

That's great... But before I left my eye spied a trickle of blood running out of Susan's nose.

“Go. I shall secure you fifty-seven seconds.”

A prick stabbed the back of my neck and caused the hairs on the back of my head to stand on end. I looked back and saw the lich had finally left her position from above the sarcophagus above the altar and began to float toward us.

“...Thirty-nine,” Susan corrected herself. “Go!”

There was about a ten second run to the wall Chris and Rose were pounding on and trying to put a dent in with her flaming sword... Add in another six or seven climbing over debris... I couldn't waste another second weighing my options and Susan barking her order pushed me onward.

But I couldn't make it more than fifteen steps before I stopped and had to look back. A second trickle of blood came down her other nostril as the lich floated about twenty centimetres off the ground toward Susan. Every so often another blue magic circle would try to form, but a glow from Shoshanah's golden staff fizzled it out. But the closer the lich got, the most haggard the priestess looked. She countered each spell she could, but the strain on her body became greater with each attempt to cast a spell.

By the time the lich neared three arms lengths away, Susan could no longer stand on two feet. She sunk down onto one knee as though pushed by some heavy and oppressive aura. Her heaving became a raspy pant and I could taste the iron in my mouth just looking at her. If I turned away, something terrible would happen. If I stood around and waited, I'd have to watch as it happened. Any curiosity or amusement the lich had gained from the experiment had

now long passed and the grip Susan had on her staff broke. The golden rod fell to the ground and on contact turned back into light and slipped into the aether.

Susan had nothing left in her to stop the next spell and it looked identical to the one the lich wizard used on Ba'el only a couple minutes before. It was at this time I felt a distinct feeling of déjà vu.

However

A heat flared up in my heart. My mind went blank and my reason whited out. A compulsion from the bottom of my heart turned me right around and charging back. But let it be said I'm a man who can learn from his mistakes. I didn't take aim at Susan as I charged; I set myself on a collision course with the lich whose back was turned.

Twelve magic circles reached their prime and gathered all their energy in one place. This would come down to the wire and end in a photo finish. I reached out, slammed into the small frame of the floating gray-skinned woman and grabbed on. I thought I might have tackled her to the ground, so stopping dead in my tracks yet again took me by surprise, but that would be the least of my shame. Something cold and very soft took up the palms of my hand.

“Ah—“ said the collective gasp from five different mouths in every direction, near and far.

The body in my arms went rigid with surprise and ceased up in what I think is a panic. The focus of the magic circles backfired and the orb which had been prepared to obliterate Susan shattered and sent beams of light corkscrewing through the air before fizzling out or exploding on contact with anything in its way.

To be honest with myself, I thought I'd hit magic barrier instead and throw off her aim, but here I am, latched onto her back and holding onto her chest with an iron grip. As her spell exploded all around the three of us, we remained in suspended animation. My hands squeezed a couple times on their own as if they weren't quite convinced what they were holding onto. I couldn't confirm it with my eyes... Yes, the feeling was there, but a cold fish feeling sunk in through my hands. The lich's body is cold as a corpse. I couldn't feel a pulse and she didn't breathe either.

A cold slap in the face put a lid on my lust and brought me back to reality. It also reignited my rage and reminded me of what I had to do.

I slid my hands down and crossed my arms across her mid-section. My knees bent and I put all the strength I had into locking my grip tight and bulging my quadriceps. A battle cry from deep down in my chest shook the earth as I pulled back the best I could. In the distance I could hear a sound which should have come from right in front of me. It had the distinct sound of tearing glass. When the shattering sound came, I pulled the lich out from where she had anchored herself in the air and my body carried on backward thanks to the momentum.

Following the shatter came the sickening crack. My back hit the ground flat and the shock spread evenly throughout my entire body, but the lich hit the ground head first. By then my hands had become numb to the cold and lost their grip. I collapsed to the ground, but the lich bounced twice more. I may have hit my head a little too, because I could swear I heard her body hit the stone with a dog toy's squeak.

Her body come to a rest face down and buttocks exposed as the cloak settled back to the ground unfavourably. I rolled over as well and put strength back into my arms to lift myself off the ground, but a countless number of micro-tears in my overstressed muscles put a stop to that. A limping Susan had to lend a shoulder and that got me back onto just one knee.

A fizzle and new sound of a dying dynamo coincided with the flickering and dying of the force walls keeping Rose, Minte and Chris imprisoned. Ba'el pulled herself from the rubble and had a cut somewhere in her hair line which bled down her face. She favored one arm and held it in place at her socket, but otherwise looked alive. Each of the girls approached cautiously... Alright, that's a lie. Two girls approached cautiously; one couldn't contain her excitement.

“Hahaha! Did you see that! Laven flipped the lich!” Rose said with a beaming smile as she ran to be my side.

But good times always end too soon. The lich's cloak began to flutter in the crypt's stagnant. Everyone went back on high alert and Rose renewed her war face. She didn't need to move a muscle and the lich raised herself back up like a reversed rendition of Nosferatu. Whatever force got used with that, the ground couldn't handle it and so it cracked and splintered under a weight of several tons.

And anger. A profound sense of anger displayed itself on the lich's face. A fury from a being otherwise incapable of feeling stabbed

right at me. An anger like that carried a special meaning; the whole crypt shook with it more so than ever before. Blue magic circles materialized the whole room over and crackled with flicks of lightning. The sound of a dynamo whirled back to life as mana gathered into nearly a hundred circles and prepared to rain death over every square inch.

“That's enough, Medae.” Came a voice.

A voice without an origin and spoke directly into my head brought everything to a halt. Everyone but the lich appeared confused and looked in every direction. No one had an idea from whence the voice came, but the lich looked dead ahead. We followed her gaze to the debris covered exit. Our eyes met in time to watch a lone figure walk through the stone and enter the room as if she were a ghost... Given what I've seen so far I wouldn't write that off either. At least until I could hear the sound of heels clacking against the stone with each step she took.

A radiant mane of long curly platinum-blonde hair. Half up and half down. On top of her head rested a tiara of opulent wealth and too many tiny gemstones embedded within it to count in a single sitting. A form fitting black cocktail dress clung to her and had slits running along the thighs that went... pretty much the whole way up. What struck me hardest of all is the scarf and gloves she wore. I could see her skin, her nearly translucent white skin, underneath it. They wavered as if alive, like a flame. Her slender fingers hidden underneath a pair of sinister ghostly claws and a fox-fur like scarf made of the same ethereal material billowing behind her as she walked heel to heel.

“Honestly,” she cooed softly. “There should be a limit to how grumpy one can be upon waking.”

The lich hurriedly dropped to one knee.

“Your highness,” the lich's first words rung like a steel xylophone.

No one had yet to drop their guard, but that didn't stop the new arrival from approaching. Her face looked familiar too. I would have studied her features more, but my eyes were drawn to hers instead. Instead of black pupils, they were bone white and that sent a chill down my spine as well as lock my gaze in place as if by a spell.

“Sir Laven, you did well. So very well. Almost beyond my expectations.”

“Who—?” I tried to ask, but the words got caught in my sore chest.

“Ah! Wait a minute,” Rose said pointing a claw rudely at the noble looking woman.

“Hekati Fioina Hyria Yaleria—” The lich announced.

She raised her head whilst crossing a hand over her heart (and holes in her chest).

“—Crown Princess of Yaleria.”

The ghostly being smiled at me with the utmost elegantly while my face is contorted in a manner most ugly and with the utmost confusion slapped across it.

Chapter 95

Deathly silence sized the crypt. Currents of magic wind which had carried pulverized debris died and so its passengers drifted toward to the ground to slumber once more. The tremors which had seized the room ceased and once extinguished candles reignited. That miasma of crackling magic power dispersed back into the aether and all that remained was a quiet ubiquitous hum of magical energy. It shared some properties of background radiation. The people of this world would call it magic. Since I wasn't throwing up or losing my hair, the assumption is it remained harmless in a raw state. Very much unlike a reactor melting down, thankfully.

Etchings reminiscent of circuit boards that shone along the stone edifices lost their lustre and returned to a lifeless gray. But even I could feel the power behind them had not left. A few flickering candles could not account for the fact that the room remained comfortably illuminated. Darkness had yet to return, so the earth had to be charged with residual magic power. That's the only way I could explain how lifeless gray stones could radiate faint light.

Candlelight alone could never pierce far enough. Whatever power that lich drew upon, it remained dormant, not banished.

And the absence of that power meant those howling winds were gone too. With it, the ruination passed as well. But a feeling of unease overshadowed any sense of relief, or the grief of priceless history being tragically obliterated. That unease came in the form of a chill wind. It spoke no louder than a whisper and paled in comparison to the banshee scream of the lich's power. Yet those quiet words blew those howling winds to the four corners.

The Lich, who responded to the name Medae, bent a knee and lowered her head toward the noble lady. All the crackling energy had vanished in tandem with her fading aggression. She was deferring to someone of a greater rank. I could hardly process the full string of names she addressed the noble as, but stuck: Princess and Yaleria.

Her skin was so pale it looked nearly translucent, It is as if she possessed no beating heart and rivers of ice flowed in her veins. It put a whole new spin on blue-blooded. The center of the woman's eyes were likewise odd with their white pearl sheen. Her eyes were bordered by a ring of red, the distinctive hue of festering magic power. They locked onto me with a soft and gentle gaze. Her lips curled into a smile, but what would normally be ruby red lips were a deathly light-

purple.

She ignored the kneeling lich who kept her head bowed and eyes locked onto the ground. The girls, now recovered and after pulling themselves from the rubble, closed in around me. Rose and Susan flanked me and locked an arm with mine. Minte glued herself to my back and peered over my shoulder while Chris stood further behind and spread her wings. Ba'el stood defiantly in front of me. But the improvised testudo formation did not slow the princess' approach.

One foot directly in front of another, like a model on the catwalk, the corpse princess approached. Her already pronounced hips rhythmically undulated side to side. A meager layer of fabric that was her revealing dress clung for dear life, the only thing clinging to life about her by the looks of it.

She didn't seem to be put off by the array of battle ready girls in front of her. They were all pretty banged and scuffed up, but still had enough fight in them to make another stand. I could feel the tension build all around me and nearly to the breaking point when she stood only three or four arm lengths in front of me. But then she curtsied and bowed her head. All that tension slowly released, but not without a tinge of confusion.

“Mr. Laven, it is good to see you are well,” She said with a voice soft as silk. “I apologize for the... Zealotry of Medae. I see that she has caused you and your friends a great deal of trouble.”

It bothered me a lot that she knew who I was and talked in such a familiar manner.

“Your highness, this is a sacred place—“ Medae's steely voice rung out.

The princess' smile turned from a professional greeting to a hidden yet polite exasperation.

“And it didn't occur to you that they reached this place by my express permission?”

Her voice rung with kindness, but each word was pointed and stung the senses. A cold snap seized the chilled air. It caused the very water vapor around the princess to transform into a billowing mist. Despite those words being pointed directly at her, the lich did not budge or avert her eyes from the ground. Not as the princess turned her back toward us and approached.

But with all that coiled malice palpable in the air, the princess did not strike the lich down. She knelt down as well and cradled the blue mop headed corpse to her own bountiful chest.

“But let's forget that now. It's been an age too long since we last met, Medae.”

One of the princess' delicate hands, sheathed in a claw made of what looked like some kind of ectoplasm, enveloped the lich's head. That dainty hand at the center of it all ruffled Medae's hair; the claw like projection passed through her without a sign of discomfort. She merely closed her emotionless and baggy eyes shut and let the woman embrace her without speaking another word. If her expression wasn't a permanent fixture on her face, I might assume she wasn't enjoying it.

...I'm not so sure about forgetting how viciously she attacked us though.

“Oh, dear. Medae, don't doubt me so,” the woman cooed. “I'm not that little child anymore. I've grown up quite a bit since we last met.”

“You'll have to forgive me for not being aware of how many years have passed since entering dormancy.”

“...About two thousand and five-hundred years,” she said with a tinge of sadness.

Twenty-five centuries! I visibly recoiled. Everyone did. Susan and Ba'el seemed to take that number right to the chest and stared off into the distance with sympathy... But I might have jumped the gun too soon, because Medae seemed unfazed by the enormous number.

“... I see,” was all she said.

“But what a difference a few ages make. We missed the Second Sundering, the Great Strife and all this Empire business, but things are looking quite promising now.”

“Is that so?”

It would have been a touching scene, but some people cannot leave well enough alone. The Princess"s a pair of ethereal claws came to rest on the lich's shoulders, but they began sliding down Medae's

curves. Yet the sensual touch from those white fingers and monstrous ghost claws did not shake the undead's stalwart resolve for a moment.

“You have not changed as much as you think, your highness,” the lich said, ignoring the molestation. “If one ignores certain... embellishments.”

“And you've only changed on the outside. I recall a homely old maid, but I see this curse did not leave your old bag of bones untouched. But what a waste. An ugly scrap of cloth like this.” she said while tugging at the dusty mortcloth serving as the lich's only clothing.

“It serves its purpose. I told you many times many years ago that such things are frivolous.”

“Boo~ Well, we'll have to change that.”

“That will not be necessary, your highness.”

Her's hands suddenly seized the lich's breasts over the cloth and began tumbling them up and down, squeezing them the whole time. And I had only just begun to acclimatize myself to how she was dressed too. I tried looking back up above shoulder level, but to no avail.

“Hmmm?” she pondered aloud while tilting her head.

Medea still wasn't reacting. Not even a blush on her face or any sense of shame.

“I feel a little warmth here.”

Now there was of blush on the lich's face.

I felt an impact on my left ribcage and nearly crumpled. Susan jabbed her elbow right between a couple ribs. The expression on her face was like the very avatar of chastisement. But at the same time I also received a kick to the right shin and knocked me back the other way. I couldn't crunch and wither away being squashed in like this. Ba'el's hoof dug right into the bone and she too was wearing a hostile expression.

“Ow! What?” I cried.

“Restrain yourself!” Susan commanded.

“Stop gawking!” Ba'el demanded.

There wasn't much I could do while being overwhelmed by both Ba'el and Susan at the same time. If you excluded me squirming in pain and cursing while the two girls lectured me. Everyone else looked with soft expressions and stifled laughs. It was hard to keep the tension high. It was hard to elicit just a bit of sympathy. The girl's relaxed a little, but not enough to drop their guard completely. Any sense that these two desired or planned to attack us had passed.

Chris was the one to muster her courage, or perhaps it might be better to say curiosity got the better of her. She stepped out from behind and met the princess halfway.

“You were alive during The Sunder?” she asked in her rarer higher pitched voice.

And there's another historical event I'm gonna have to ask about later... Or maybe it is more of a mythical event? Anyways, the corpse woman let go of the lich's breasts and pulled herself away. Medae fixed her cloth while the princess walked out to met the wyvern.

“To say alive may not be the correct word. But yes, so far as I can reason, the last time I was among the living would be then. But I loath such a depressing title... No one appears to recall much of life before then... Sadly, neither can I.”

“Ahem,” Chris coughed loudly and regained her heroic baritone. “Please forgive my rudeness. I am Christophaclies. Champion of justice and right hand to her highness Violetta Wyrm of Domdracveria.”

Her's serene smile had returned while the wyvern bowed while giving her formal introduction. But she didn't offer another graceful bow in return. She did, however, offer a hand.... In a manner of speaking.

Without a word she scooped up Chris' massive left breast. She held it up and looked upon it like the skull of Yorick; she pinched her chin with her other hand. Chris' knightly expression froze in place, as did the rest of her. Next came the flush of red across her face when the princess began to test the breast's heft by tumbling it.

“An interesting style. Flawless shape with minimal sag. A form fitting top with great support. A very daring exposure of the underside's skin. Quite exciting. Barely tamed; a hint of wildness.”

Chris quickly came to her senses and jumped away. Meanwhile, the woman stood unfazed by the rush of wind from Chris' wings. The only hint that she was still real and took up space being her platinum colored hair which fluttered wildly. Chris raised her talons to cover her chest and bared her fangs with an expression twisted in both fury and embarrassment.

Ba'el wore a look of amusement before it dawned on her that there was no one standing in the way between her and the princess. But that revelation came too quickly when she appeared next to Ba'el as though she had skipped all the space between them in the blink of an eye. The princess held the demon's cape in her hand and ran her fingers along the gold embroidery in its hem.

“No sewing marks. An enchanting blend of fine green wool with seamless gold embroidery along the hem. Certainly not from any craftsman's table. A fabrication of pure imagination. Fascinating.”

“Hey! Clammy hands off the merchandise you—”

Pulling her cloak away was an overwhelmingly easy task for Ba'el, but that only served to drop her guard.

“And what adorable pinchable cheeks!”

Ba'el's vulgar protests were stopped short when those ethereal claws grabbed hold of Ba'el's face and playfully tugged and pulled like a dreaded dire aunt. Every sound coming out of Ba'el's mouth became garbled, the skin of her cheeks becoming pale from the cold rather than bright pink from the rush of blood. Eventually she recomposed herself enough to swat the claws of Hryia away and leaped back as Chris had done.

“ Hekati Fioina Hyria Yaleria,” Susan said, repeating what Medae had muttered so quietly before.

Her voice was stern. She tried exuding a sense of authority to stop the madness... But after I heard the name said more clearly the second time around—

“Wait... Hyria? That Hyria?”

Her smile curved another few degrees while looking back toward me. It pleased her greatly when she saw the shocked look of realization on my face. In response she snapped her fingers, the ethereal claw surrounding her hand made the exact same motion.

Another figure materialized from nothing a second later. The two looked like twins, but the newcomer had flush white-pinkish skins and one-hundred percent more... alive. It moved on its own accord, took a bow and gave an identical smile in sync with the original.

“AH!” Rose shouted and rudely pointed a claw. “It's the floozy from the ball!”

My body moved on instinct. I slid over and behind Rose to cover her mouth before she could say anything more. The speed I achieved surprised Rose who protested, weakly. Hyria and her human looking clone tilted their heads inquisitively. I don't think that word was in her vocabulary.

The clone spoke in lieu of the original, “It would be rather imprudent of me to reveal myself before such a crowd, would it not? Likewise, would I not be forced to waste precious time explaining my true form in such a place. Is not my appearance more natural in an environment such as this?”

“Maybe I understand the deceit, but still don't appreciate it,” I snapped back.

“But you still volunteered your services in the end... For the right price.”

“That's not what volunteer means,” Susan pouted, hung up over the semantics with her cheeks still puffed out in a huff. “And cease this farce at once!”

And during the few seconds I was busing exchanging words with the double, the original had vanished. She had been there in my peripheral vision, but I never noticed her vanish.

“My my, is this not also absolutely precious!” came Hyria's voice from behind.

I turned to see her standing behind a rigid Minte. She towered a head's height over the girl while her hands slithered down the assassin's hips. With her pale and dainty fingers, the princess held the scraps of cloth making up her skirt. Hyria lifted them carelessly into the air, the green and white stripes of her underwear now exposed.

Minte had yet to process what was happening. The expression on her face went blank, blanker than usual. Top that all off with completely blank pair of eyes that were fixed in the upright and forward

position in case of a crash. Only when the chill of Hyria's touch registered and the signal shot up her sputtering nervous system did she react. Her antenna twisted and curled in on themselves while a blush spread across her yet unbroken stoicism.

"Did you cut this yourself? Very risque. But I notice you moving your hips all wrong. A little flick at the apex of the step— and the right angle from the fine gentleman here— and you can show off that adorable little number underneath. Did you buy that, or sew it yourself? I can see by the callus on your fingers that you—"

Hyria's fingers crawled toward the strings tying Minte's underwear tied at the flanks of her hips. That's the moment the spell broke. A buzz from Minte's wings propelled her into a leap which could have taken her straight into the ceiling. Her nimble body rocketed out of the princess' grip; her trajectory swung around so she could take refuge behind me. I could feel her fingers grip tightly to my side as she peeked around cautiously. The blades resting against her forearms twitched and looked ready to swing to their battle-ready position in the time it'd take for a muscle to twitch once.

Hyria didn't seem to be bothered by the reaction and decided not to dwell on it. With a snap of her fingers, the clone flickered a couple times before vanishing into thin air.

"An illusion like that would explain why she wasn't asleep back then," Ba'el grumbled.

"And the lack of a pulse," Chris nodded in agreement while rubbing her chest because of the red frost mark shaped like a palm.

"The dead need not sleep," Hyria nodded with blithe. "At least not in the sense those with a pulse would understand."

"A state of undead stasis," Susan said while stepping out to confront the princess.

I could hear her neck snap as she quickly turned her gaze toward Susan. Hyria's eyes were like magnets and Susan's garb acted like a ferromagnetic lump of iron.

"What a peculiar manner of dress," Hyria said, folding her hands (and claws by extension) in a prayer-like fashion. "Is that dyed linen or silk? What a rich shade of blue~ And is that pure gold? It's, how should I say? Absolutely divine~"

Shoshanah, who had prepared a stoic and professional face, had it broken in an instant. Hyria had once again abandoned any sense of manners. She began tugging at the hem of Susan's sheer harem pants. Yet only the claw pinched the fabric between its large digits, the actual hand hung idle at its core. Susan's tail puffed out in full bristle and a shiver travelled up along her spine till I could almost see static shoot out the tips of her ears. Hyria's ethereal hands continued unabashed till they almost reached Susan's top. The anubis recovered her senses in time to leap away and take refuge behind my back— next to Minte— like a frightened puppy.

Hyria flexed her claws in the air, groping something invisible before lowering them in dejection. She didn't give chase, thankfully. Susan sunk her paws into each of my shoulders and peered over my shoulder to bark back at the princess.

"What do you think you are doing!" Susan barked back from behind my shoulder.

"My my~ I offer my humble apologies. I let my hobby run wild for a second there."

Only one second?... And how would she define her streak until that point? If she carried herself in a manner to purposefully give off an aura of royalty, then it's a shame it gets put to waste when she acts like this soon after. It blew away the demure high-class lady act to pieces, but that wasn't a recent discovery. My first impression died a couple minutes back on first contact.

I turned my head back to Susan and had to ask, "Did you really not expect that to happen?"

"I reinforced a barrier to prevent that!" She barked back with furious eyes still locked onto Hyria.

"Claws," Minte whispered. "They have no presence. Null. Nothing. She has no scent. She makes no noise."

I titled my head back over to my other shoulder where Minte spoke from.

"Then what about our wizard over there? She's dead too," I said.

"Raw power. No desire to conceal... Can smell it," Minte replied.

So not only does she lack a pulse, she has no life signs at all. If she weren't moving and had that eerie magical glimmer to her eyes, you wouldn't be able to tell her apart from a corpse. On top of that, there were those claws of hers. Ethereal like a ghost, but able to interact with physical objects. Yet they could not be stopped by a magical barrier.

But there is one girl left who was standing unflustered by it all. With arms crossed to my right, Rose watched with an uncanny and uncharacteristic sage-like appearance. She didn't flinch as Hyria began her seductive walk toward her.

“Black on that skin looks absolutely gorgeous. Such a thin cut string too. How daring~ Trimmed with that red— are those your natural scales you used to reinforce your top and waist?”

Snatch

I must have blinked and missed it, but I heard some sort of impact. Hyria's delicate hand had been enveloped by something else. Rose's claw pierced right through the ethereal claw and grabbed hold of it an arm's length away. A sharp and toothy grin slowly replaced her somberness.

“...Impressive,” Hyria said softly with narrowing eyes.

I kept my eyes wide and ready for the next one which came soon after. Next came the sound of flexing muscle and groaning bones. Hyria tried to pull her arm away in such a way that it would leave Rose's center exposed, but it turned into an arm wrestle instead. The Salamander's grin remained, but her eyebrows lowered along with her tail letting off a shower of fresh embers. It shouldn't be a contest, the princess' arms were so pale and thin in relation to Rose's, but they were locked in a genuine struggle.

Hyria quickly lashed out with her other hand, which she shaped like a spear. The pale claw tried to cut upward through Rose's blind spot, but she managed to reach down and catch it by the wrist. Now there were two struggles. One with Rose pulling inward and the other pushing down. Neither front budged. Hot and cold mixed and gave off a sizzle which grew louder..

“Very impressive.”

“Anyone would catch on after seeing it that many times,”

Rose replied, widening her grin.

Susan just so happened to look down at herself and noticed a leftover patch of frost in the shape of a hand on her top. She growled and wiped off the remnant while her blush turned a deeper shade of red. Minte casually followed suit, but did so with her rear end which rained a few flakes of frost onto the stone to melt.

And as quickly as they clashed, the two exchanged a silent agreement with their eyes and parted ways. Neither followed up with a low blow, nor dirty trick and Hyria turned and walked away. She swayed her hips like before and stuck out her chest with as much pride... But she lost? I wasn't confident enough to decipher anything from those ten seconds subtle body language exchange, but Rose wasn't a good loser and her mood had not diminished a bit.

“And remember that,” Rose shouted out. “Next time you make a move for his pants like that.”

What? I think I missed something there. Rose looked over casually after having sense my palpable confusion.

“She had her eyes on your pants,” she said as if it were not that big of a deal. “If ya think I'm gonna let some stranger waltz up like that, you got another thing coming!”

“Maybe help your friends too,” Chris pouted.

Hyria sighed and shook her head while catwalking her way back toward where Medae waited patiently.

“Such a pretty shade of blue. And with a type of fabric that even I do not know... Oh well, if there lies a secret the good knight wishes to protect... So be it,”

Now no one felt like stepping forward now, so Medae took it upon herself to stand back up and reign the princess back in. Her voice as emotionless steely as before.

“Your highness, if you are finished, how is it you came to find this place?”

Hyria smiled and pointed my way.

“I saw him here,”

My eyebrows knitted in confusion on their own. I couldn't let something that cryptic slide.

“My memory might not be in the best of shape, but I'm pretty sure this is the first time I've been here. What with the hidden location of the ancient sealed door and all that.”

“That is an oddly specific vision. Even from you,” Medae said, cocking an eyebrow.

At long last, the lich and I were finally on the same page about something. We're making some quick progress after she tried to kill me a few minutes ago. She gave one quick glance over in my direction and continued her thought out loud.

“Her highness is an oracle. She possesses prophetic powers.”

“Several weeks ago, your image came to me,” Hyria said. “ I saw you standing here in this very room. I saw myself there as well. I knew you would be at Count Aaron's ball before that point as well. Once I saw where you went, I knew I had finally found Medae's resting place.”

“As I said, that is an oddly specific vision, your highness.”

“I have my ways,” Hyria said, chuckling lightly.

And that's when she reached underneath her scarf. From behind that ectoplasmic minx coat accessory, she produced an amulet. It was shaped like a dream catcher. One ring of gold that could fit in the palm of my hand. A cobweb of tiny golden filaments reached toward the center where a blue gemstone resided... Calling it a gemstone may be too far of a stretch, because it looked more like a chip from a gemstone. Nothing as elegant or profound as the emerald crystal she handed to me.

But witnessing it caused my heart to stop.

A burning sensation from my pocket felt like it would soon burn through my leg. Yet when my hand slapped down to smother it out, the feeling got replaced with dry ice. It instantly drove my hand back. And as soon as it came, it went. I looked around and no one seemed to notice my spasm, their eyes were all drawn to the princess' heirloom.

“I find it one day while wandering the Shadelands. It had to

be almost three-hundred years ago now. Upon my next meditation, I felt as though a great veil had been lifted off the future. What changes this new age would bring, the strife and the joy."

Hyria's eyes fuzzed over and we were in danger of losing her. There was much we still had to know, so I suppressed the pain and the vague heart wrenching feeling that I was missing something which escaped my grasp. But before I got that chance—

"And revealed to me the most amazing and handsome hunk EVER!"

Hyria's eyes went from looking forlorn to ecstatic at break-neck speed. I'm sure she violated quite a few highway speed laws if not outright physical ones. I felt as though we had stepped on a landmine. The octave of her voice went in through one ear and out the other like a bullet. It left a ringing in my ear that wouldn't go away no matter how far and rigorously I jammed a finger down there. By the time I managed to open my eyes again, the image of the regal princess had been replaced by a schoolgirl who could not contained her excitement.

"I knew him from my dreams for so so so so long~"

"I have a feeling I don't want to know how long," Ba'el groaned.

"I knew from those chubby little baby cheeks he'd grow up to be such a stallion~"

"I said I didn't want to know!" Ba'el shouted back.

And there went the last shred of a good first impression. But a switch had been flipped and Hyria kept talking to herself faster and faster as the rest of us watched her with draining spirits.

"Please, excuse her highness' eccentricities. I assure you she would not rob from the craddle."

"That doesn't quite settle the issue," I said with a grimace.

She was a monster, so being attracted to a man is natural... But couple that with prophetic powers and a life expectancy that is null and void on account of being undead meant that there could be room for an... age discrepancy. But a crush one someone before they are born and all the years until maturity.... Not that I saw a lot of maturity at the moment. She hopped around in circles with her hands up to her

cheeks. Her pale skin flushed red—somehow—and she acted like a twelve year old girl at a boy-band concert.

“Her highness sees time differently than normal. At times it is hard to keep her grounded in both reality and the present.”

“Duke Brenden Gregor Malco,” Hyria said wistfully and stared with doughy eyes into the distance.

“I am relived she has remembered her position,” the lich said with an ever so minor display of emotion, of relief. “I am sure his royal highness would be turning in his grave if she fell for the stable-boy.”

“The Duke fella who skipped out on the party, right?” Rose noted.

“Hmm, such a shame too. But all for the better. His presence would have led to disaster. Which is why I distracted him.”

“Hold up. Can you slow down and inform the rest of us what page we're on now,” I said.

“Count Aaron would have apprehended him,” Hyria said, as a matter-of-fact. “So I challenged him to a game which would keep him holed up in his keep.”

“Your highness...” Medae grumbled. “You are not abusing your gift, are you?”

“So what if I know any and all of his next moves? He fancies himself a fine warrior and general, so a game of chess was perfect for this plan. He's got this adorable little stubborn streak to him. If you can defeat me, best of three, I shall never haunt nevermore. That was the deal, and he's so confident, he jumped at the chance.”

“So you were bothering him...” Medae groaned.

“How could I not~”

Oh god, she started to drool. And she said she knew what he looked like with baby cheeks too. This Brenden guy might be sitting one some real nasty repressed memories.

“I'm pretty sure a young boy would be scared shitless with someone sneaking in through the window at night looking like that...

Barely able to restrain herself," I mumbled quietly.

"If she restrained herself," Ba'el whispered back.

"And thou are one to talk," Susan chided.

"You want to say that again, ya bitch?" Ba'el shot back, fangs bared and tail bristling.

Sparks flew between Susan and Ba'el while they stared each other down. Everyone else ignored them, so I thought it safe to do so as well. Let it pass without giving it attention and they'll stop soon.

"That kinda invalidates the whole Brightwall business, doesn't it?" Chris interjected.

"Yeah yeah" Rose nodded. "That thing is supposed to keep the undead out, right? How are you getting around it?"

"If only I knew," Hyria shrugged. "It does keep the Yalerian curse at bay. Perhaps it is not strong enough to bar high-class undead such as myself. Wights were said to be the ghastly spirits of heroes and royalty, after-all. In a time long past, my very existence would have been an omen of great calamity. But as for myself, that I remain in this world is a blessing."

"Royalty... Your last name is Yaleria. So are you some sort of remnant from this place's long lost dynasty or something?" I asked.

"Yes. I was the last crown princess of Yaleria. My father—its last king. Both titles existed before the erection of that gaudy structure; the Brightwall."

"But this place is a duchy, not a kingdom or anything, right?" Rose asked.

"Rose is correct," said Susan. "There is no law in this land, no divine right, that could crown a king or queen."

"Are you so certain?" Hyria said, turning her eyes to Susan.

The anubis glared at the princess and tried to decipher it, but the exponentially increasing confusion on her face told me whatever thought she dwelt on wasn't producing results.

"Do you possess some ability to know of these things? I invite you to look again."

Susan took a deep breath and closed her eyes. I watched as they twitched underneath, the way they would if she were reading from a book. It did not take long until they violently shot open again.

“There's... Nothing there...” the priestess said, agape.

“I am sure that you, if my assumption is correct, know of a similar phenomenon.”

“Hold on now,” I said while putting my hand on Susan's shoulder and shook her back down to earth. “She's not saying—“

“An erased kingdom...” she muttered, her voice hollow and empty.

That desert in the middle of the north. An odd place; surrounded by taiga, boreal forests, tundra further north, great salt wastes further east while all while hemmed in by tall glacial capped mountains. What was once a very ancient kingdom remained as a scar on the world, unchanged as history rolled onward like a mighty wheel. If you had carved out ancient Egypt from the Nile and dumped it in the middle of Siberia... that's the impression I got. A civilization thousands of miles from where it belonged. Pyramids in the Gobi desert, but about a hundred times more inhospitable.

“You do not mean to say—?”

“Exactly what you are about to say,” Hyria said with a teasing smile. “Did I not say I last lived before the Second Sundering? This is Yaleria.”

“But—!” Susan tried to cry out.

“You have travelled beyond the Brightwall. This is the what the children of the Empire call the Shadelands... True Yaleria.”

“That puts everything into place,” Ba'el mused. “That Brightwall is the cork on the ley-line, ain't it?”

“Perceptive... Demon,” Medae said, but put a malicious twist onto title.

The situation is reeling out of control.

“Ba'el, you better explain this.”

The demon sighed, but continued, “I'm missing a bunch of details, so stop me if I'm wrong here... Yaleria was a very active community in the arcane arts, right? Not much work for someone in my line of work in a place like that. Can't say I ever visited during the few centuries this kingdom of yours was active. I probably didn't care much about either, to be honest... I was in the business of offering power and prolonged life using other methods. Can't sell sand in a desert. But I'm starting to get a hunch what kind of mumbo-jumbo you guys got up to around here.”

“The necrotic arts,” Medae nodded.

If they're talking about what I think they are talking about—

“Necrotic? Necromancy? You mean raising the dead?”

“There is more too it, but yes. The magical art of necromancy formed the backbone of Yalerian society,” Hyria spoke with unreserved pride.

“Wait. We're talking zombies and living skeletons here.”

“A cheap labor force,” Medae said.

“Oh, Medea, no need to be so cynical,” Hyria chastised the lich, lightly. “But if that will save us time, then yes. Think of it as such if you will. Such a label is one outsiders may find most agreeable.”

“Tireless are the knights of Yalerian shield/ those who tirelessly scour the field / nor before their enemies yield,” Chris recanted. “That gives an old poem new meaning...”

“Poems telling tales of times long turned to myth. Stories change over time and when conveyed place to place,” Hyria regaled. “Whatever stories you know, they are bastardizations.”

“They are all about righteous knights keeping the tide of the undead away. Keeping that evil at bay so it does not overrun the world,” Chris said.

“You are no doubt familiar with the tribes that clung to the Wyrmback mountains. Those ancient peoples who worshipped dragon gods and kings... Had those dragons turned on them, but the humans still prevailed, would not your stories of yore tell of dragons slaughtered? In ancient Yaleriam, the legends state the kingdom was founded upon the world of the living and dead meet. Its earliest

settlement lay next to a cave which is said to have connected directly to the land of the dead. Its patron goddess, from which my name is derived, is Hekate. The barrier between life and death was unusually fragile. The living communed with the spirits of the deceased. Sons spoke of deeds and duty with great-grand fathers. Mothers knew their great-grandmothers watched over their children Twas a common thing. Spirits were said to have roamed free. To both protect the family and punish for wrongs done. The bones of the dead were exhumed and given a breath of life from the goddess. A great deal of trust offered to her priests. They created tireless serfs who worked the fields with no complaint. Likewise, they filled ranks and files of tireless warriors that knew no fear nor pain."

Susan had a horrified expression on her face.

"You did what with the bodies of the deceased? They walked the earth? This was allowed!"

"And with idle hands, the living of Yaleria spent their days in leisure and composed great works of art. Sadly, I cannot show them to you. Those too all vanished as time marched on. A bitter Irony," Hyria lamented.

"And you let corpses rot," Medea cut in. "You pulled the brains from their skulls and kept the organs in jars. I recall tales of living dead among—"

"Mummification. A breath of life to their bodies to bind the soul in servitude so they may serve and protect a master's journey to the afterlife. They are not mindless automatons nor soulless husks!"

Shit. Susan looked about ready to lash out and attack again.

I stepped out in front of Susan and threw my arm out to bar her path.

"So that explains both of you?"

"Medae was a member of my Father's court. One of five Arch-Mages residing in Yaleria. Long ago she performed the necessary ritual to achieve lichdom. So that she may serve many lifetimes for our kingdom. She constructed a phylactery and bound her soul to it. That granted her an artificial body to walk this material world. She served not only my father, but my father's father and his father before him."

“Alright,” Rose interrupted. “Then what about you? You're going through kings faster than servants.”

“The passing of kings and queens never exceeded sixty years of rule,” Medae responded. “He, or she, would not die before, nor live after. A ruler's life in Yaleria was tied to a cycle of renewal. Just as the seasons come and go, so too must a kingdom's heart, the soil grows tired and dead if seeded too many times.”

Hyria's bright and chipper expression died and stayed as dead as her. It almost brought Rose and I to retract that statement, but Medae continued with the story before either of us got the chance.

“Yet Yaleria's history came to a sudden halt. Not from its external enemies and not from some betrayal... It came from a disaster. To say it was a natural disaster would be facetious. Something went awry with Yaleria's ley-line. An unnatural event. What brought an unparalleled boon became unstable. The once docile dead rebelled and turned on the people. A hoard of cannibals. The earth protested and shook. Entire towns were swallowed up by the earth. This plague of disasters hounded the Kingdom during the former King's dying days. The people rebelled after turning to their goddess to save yieled not even a god's tear... Hekate did not answer... The others did. The other gods must have seen the spread of death as a threat to the rest of their garden of creation. Like a blight jumping from one furrow to the next. The Daggerspire mountains rose from nothing and sealed off most of Yaleria. Rogue elements out of the King's control built the Brightwall keep above the old nexus of the ley-line and spread the wall to join the bottleneck of the Daggerspires together.”

“But... Not before they waged their rebellion against my father,” Hryia struggled to speak. “They blamed my family for the kingdom's fall and the curse that befell it... They despaired over being abandoned by the gods...”

“I did my best to protect him, but one by one we Arch-Mages fell. Their phylacteries were smashed when overcome in battle, or destroyed by trusted aids. I was more fortunate. My followers and I were sealed away... Deep within these catacombs, the besieging forces seeking my demise could not penetrate far enough into this sacred chamber. It appears the magic reserve of my assistants were insufficient to preserve them through the centuries. They have been reduced... to dust...”

Now that I think of it, her skeletal remains were mostly ash.

“But in the end my survival meant I failed to protect my liege when the rebels finally reached him... For such a reason I believe is why there is no longer a king for Yaleria.”

And there was something else about that story which stood out.

“And that's why all the bodies were burned?”

Hyria and Medae nodded.

“To stop them from coming back to life?”

“They are ignorant as to why they do so to this day,” Hyria sighed. “Neither do they comprehend the true reason why they have guarded the Brightwall for over two millennia. That those corpses which occasionally batter against the stones were once their ancestors and former countrymen is lost to them... And so Greater Yaleria became the Shadelands. A cursed land coated in eternal darkness. The sun may pass over your Yaleria, but never over the Shadelands. And in that environment, the undead thrived. It saw hordes of shambling undead, all seeking life force to feast upon. Its denizens assailed the Brightwalls many times over the years.”

Alright. I think that's enough of this. I'm having my own vision and bad feeling about where this is going. I looked around and met eyes with Rose. We exchanged a look and I think we set ourselves onto the same page.

Rose spoke up first, “About that pay...”

Ba'el pounded one paw into the other, “Damn, I forgot all about that! Can't believe myself right now. You two trying to pull a fast one on us and scrimp out on us? This here wont cover costs for long with the living torch here.” Ba'el jangled the coin purse full of silver for effect. “One week, tops.”

Rose's stomach grumbled.

“Six days,” Rose said.

I jumped in next.

“What they said. That was a nice story and all. But we delivered your heirloom and we'd like to get paid now.”

“My friend said to make sure you always get paid right away.

Last time we didn't, she hired me for debt collection. And that is pretty boring. I mean, those guys couldn't really fight and breaking their legs were a chose... But she did say that was to teach 'em a lesson..."

"Shh, Rose. Keep a lid on it," I seethed.

"That old thing?" Hyria said dismissively, and ignoring Rose. "My my~ that thing never had value beyond a tool."

I didn't like the inflection she put on the word: tool.

"A void crystal," Medae added. "Deprived of magic...That is how you did it... I must admit that I missed it during the melee."

No. Don't tell Hyria is going to say—

"Yes. That is why I had to hire you. It shattered the seal on contact, did it not? But a void crystal as pure and large as I needed— For the century I spent methodically constructing it should the opportunity present itself— It required someone who would not short it out on contact. Lo and behold, who should grace my sights? A man who fits that criteria, falling like manna from heaven. Those rebels who slew my father and the world I knew also sealed it away behind a barrier that rejects my kind. It rendered me helpless, but in you I found the missing piece of a puzzle. A solution to a problem over a thousand years old."

"Good. Glad to hear it. Now all that done and out of the way and we'll exit stage—"

"Medae," Hyria beckoned, interrupting me. "I shall require your power and expertise to create another."

"...Is our time so short?" the lich asked. "If you seek to break the Brightwall's power... It shall take everything I have... and the magic this place sacred holds. I shall be depleted for at least two lunar cycles."

Hyria nodded, the lich offered an emotionless one in affirmation and strode off. She walked past us without a care and climbed back up to her resting place. No doubt to collect the void crystal and prepare it once more. Then the princess turned her attention back to us.

"If you desire your reward, then this renewed crystal will serve as your key. Unlock the second seal, and whatever treasures behind it that you can carry, let that be the debt I owe to you."

“A second seal? You're talking about the Ley-line!” Ba'el shouted.

“Correct. The time has come to wash away the Brightwall and make Yaleria whole again.”

“And unleash the dead!” Chris bellowed.

“Like Medae, they have all slumbered and not a one has risen in three-hundred years. Just like you all, they have changed. I know it. And for the new age, they shall be needed.”

This is going to be a step too far. What right do I have to do such a thing? All I wanted is to pass through and work part-time to pay the way.

“Waking up one of your friends is more than enough.”

“Disaster will befall Yaleria should you refuse. Did I not say Count Aaron is on the move. He seeks to overthrow Malco. MY Malco! Do not think you will be treated fairly in the chaos of his coronation. Do not think the future of our kind will not suffer with the title of Duke in his possession.”

“Laven... Wait,” Ba'el said while tugging on my sleave. “She said it's uncork the ley-line.”

“Ba'el?”

“You do realize that'd cause all that old magic that made Yaleria what it was long ago a reality today, right?”

“... You just want some of that for yourself.”

“And what of it!” Ba'el screamed back.

“And Christophaclies. Does not the dragon blood stir once more in Domdracveria? Will it weather the coming storm? Will it stand friendless and without allies?”

“...You want to bring back the kingdom of the undead,” Chris said with cold eyes.

“That's correct. I will take Malco, reunite Yaleria and bring honor back to my father. And to his father's father as well. The slumbering Dread Knights will rise again as well.”

Chris looked away with what were now heavy eyes.

“And such a battle will be harrowing,” Hyria stated.

Rose's ear fins twitched and her head locked onto the princess' words.

“Battle you say?”

“At the Brightkeep itself.”

Rose's eyes shimmered and an eager smile crossed her face while those eyed daydreamed.

“And a wind that follows Aaron, the coming of a Red Mist. A servant to the Light god,” came Hyria's next cryptic words of choice.

The silent Minte let a breath of air escape her lungs. That was as good as a scream for her. I watched as her eyes steeled themselves and a worrisome frown cross her lips.

“I've seen it. It will come to pass if Aaron is not stopped. Surely, you do not wish to meet her again.”

Minte looked away. I spied a grimace. A complex expression on her normally emotionless face.

“Hold your serpent's tongue,” Susan growled. “Cease at once. We've tolerated your petty deceptions long enough. We are not tools at your disposal."

“I am merely bestowing upon you prospects and warnings from a possible future time. Besides, there be nothing more fierce than a lover scorned. Do not take this too personally, but I must secure my Malco's safety. The north will need freed Yaleria as well. Harboring your hatred for now is but a small price to pay. Yet I am sure once you know what I know, you will all readily agree in assisting me. It is in all your best interests... Especially when a clue to the mystery seeks resides at the seal."

“What?” Susan and I called out at the same time.

“You seek the stars, do you not? Face the trials, stand before the seal, and I promise upon my father's honor, you will have much revealed to you,” Hyria said with an expression that lacked a trace of her usual jest.

Everywhere I looked the girls all had a dire expression, or stars in their eyes. That left me alone.

Medae spoke from far above and behind us with candor, “Besides. You will never escape this place's labyrinth without her highness' aid.”

That snapped everyone's attention back.

“What— Did— You— Say?” I said between grit teeth.

“The entrance closed behind you a long time ago. You will starve wandering this lifeless place in mere days.”

“You—!” I screamed with clenched fists.

“I apologize for a second time... But I have seen the future. And I will prevent it. Thankfully, its avoidance benefits us both... Now... Have we come to terms?” Hyria said.

Once again, she offered a smile and her hand, encased in its ghastly ethereal claw, toward me.

***

Within the highest keep on a castle watching over Yalerian field and swamp, seated before a table with pieces arrayed on a chessboard, pondered Duke Malco. He was dressed in his sleepwear, but kept a cloak of wolf pelts draped over his broad shoulders. He also continued to wear a pair of thick leather boots that he tapped relentlessly against the ground. Its lonely echo reverberated off the spartan decorated walls. Frogs croaked and the hooting of owls were ushered in through the window. Moonlight bathed the room, its sole competition being the candle lighting the chess board and casting long shadows for its few remaining pieces.

The man's long black hair hung over his shoulders like a mane, but its luster was not present. Worry made it disheveled and it had not been properly washed for days. His hazel eyes bore holes into the board, but the pieces refused to move. The one time he smashed them in anger... that woman appeared from nowhere and set them back to how they were before. She did it with a smile and implored him to take his move. All with a smile. Remembering that smile made the handsome battle scared face of his contort with anger.

That anger could not be constrained to his chair, so he pushed it back with great force. It fell over and clattered to the ground with a loud bang. He cared not and strode his way to the window. There he watched over the Brightwall that rose out of the ground two full leagues away. Even at this distance it displayed its mighty height and massive girth. No other like it could be built. Dwarven craft, magics of all kind, a shattered nation coming together with the help of the gods to construct it.

And Yaleria's eternal duty to see it never falls. Duke Malco looked upon it to give him strength. He inherited it from his father, as did his father before him. The spectre which haunted him for years would be banished forever, but only if he could win this game of skill. He won once, easily. But the second game the woman ran circles around him. No matter how long he though, his every move was seen through. It is as if she were always ten steps ahead of him.

She had been playing him for a fool. That witch built up his confidence and then crushed it for her amusement. Now he remembered the smile when she tipped over his king for the first time. He was a Duke, a warrior and a general like his father before him, but unlike other generals, the man could never afford to lose a single battle. Not ever... But this third game, the one which would decide it... Seemed doomed to fail from the start.

But his thoughts could not stay on such matter forever. His keen eyes picked up on a sight that existed only in his nightmares. One of the great banners, the Yalerian standard fluttering above the Brightkeep itself, vanished. Malco's heart jumped out of his chest. His hands gripped the stone window sill hard that the masonry nearly shattered.

One of his knight-lieutenants smashed the door off the hinges behind him. There was no time to knock.

“Your highness!” He rasped with parched breath. “Courier pigeon from the Birghtkeep! They're being attacked!”

“What?” Malco bellowed. “By whom?”

“I-it's not that, sir! It's been seized by men, not corpses!”

Malco turned back around, and saw colors being raised above the Brightkeep. He did not recognize them at first. The standards of all his subjects, and those neighboring his Duchy were known to him... But there was one. One without history.

“Aaron...” Malco seethed with bloodshot eyes.

“S-sir!” Another knight came barrelling into the room to join the other. “There's an army in the field! It's maneuvering to besiege us!”

“If they control the Brightkeep, hold the ground between here and there—“

“And have us besieged... Then that means our supply line is cut-off,” Malco said, finishing his lieutenant's thought.

The Brightwall is the bulwark, and the castle, the Capital of Yaleria, was meant to be the center of mass. Everything relied on the supply line from the Brightwall and where they stood idly by.

“Barricade everything! We'll have to hold out long enough to be relieved!” Malco ordered.

The two knight-lieutenant's saluted and rushed off.

Malco turned back to the window and stared daggers at the wall where his standards fell one by one and were replaced with the gaudy and ugly colors of Count Aaron.

“You spineless peasant scum,” Malco cursed.

But Malco knew he wasn't dealing with someone who posed no threat... He even began to wonder if relief would come at all. Or if Aaron had bought them off. Malco knew someone plotted against him. In his heart of hearts he wished it were an outsider... But he knew at the depths of his soul that it could only be Aaron... But without proof, the snake would have struck much sooner.

He turned back to the chessboard once more. He stared at the king.

“Three moves till check. Was that right?” He said with a hollow voice.

His finger reached out toward it. He let it rest on the ebony carved crown... But he pulled his hand away. Footsteps echoed once more in the room as he pulled himself toward his armory.

Malco would not choose one form of surrender to avoid defeat.

Chapter 96

“Read it and weep!” Bellowed the square faced man as he slapped a pair of playing cards onto the table.

Three other men around the table leaned forward and peered through the poorly lit room and then quickly erupted into laughter. A fifth man, sitting diagonally from the first, didn't even bother to lean forward. He kept a sullen expression on an otherwise youthful face, his stringy body deflated after having puffed it out like a prize roster one minute ago. Now he watched with bitter eyes as the guffawing and burly man hooked his arms around the pile of silver and copper coins and reeled it in.

“That'll teach ya your place, ya little shit,” the man laughed again in a chorus with the others.

“One more show like that and you'll be helping Harold with the count real early like,” chuckled a portly man at the head of the table.

Deep below the surface where the Brightkeep rose up into the sky, the dungeons drove into the earth. Adjacent to one of its many storerooms, a meeting of fellow mercenaries took place. Instead of doing their job as ordered, they stood guard around a table and gambled. The losers would get to work taking inventory, the winner would also count, but only the winnings collected from the others.

The fat man seized the deck and the discarded cards, rolled up the sleeves of his padded gambeson and began to shuffle them in his pudgy fingers. Everyone else around the table began to toss in their next buy-in, the previous loser following suit, albeit resentfully.

“Hey, how about we speed this up and double the buy-in?” The burly man said with a grin.

The young and gangly man's eyes shot open wide and he watched all the other players' eyes become like wolves. He had put more than half of what he had left from his advance pay into that last hand. The captain wasn't going to give him an advance on the next one either. A clubbing over the head with a mailed fist is the best he'd must for sure.

“Hold on now—“ He tried to protest.

“Shut ya mouth, Jerry. You're gonna learn a lesson tonight,

one way or another.

“Hey, Herald!'” A bald man with a long black van dyck shouted out. “Jerry'll be with ya in the loser's corner real quick!”

“Screw you!” Herald shouted back from the darkness of the store room.

The venom in his voice was met with uproarious laughter from the four mercenaries. They followed up by doubling the buy-in and bullying the younger one to buy in as well. The pot in the middle of the table was almost as large as the last one at the very end of the round.

“Still, of all things, this job is a cinch,” the fat man sighed while dealing out the next hand to each of the players.

“Can't argue there,” the last man said, breaking his silence while running his hand through his ginger colored Mohawk. “So much for the great and brave knights of Yaleria putting up a fight.”

“That's because they let us in, ya idiot. That's how those types work,” The burly man grinned while rubbing the black stubble on his chin. “You would have wanted to be there for it. The look on the commander's face when everyone drew their blades.”

“I heard they stood around shocked for a five whole seconds before they were forced to drop their blades,” the fat man's stomach rolled while holding back another laugh. “Pretty ballsy move from that Count fellow.”

“That's what I meant, ya idiots,” The red haired man protested. “We didn't even have to dish out a fight. Just march those losers into their cells and squat around. I pity those idiots having to storm the actual castle.”

“I'll agree on that,” the bearded man nodded. “They're fighting knights, soldiers and the like out there... Like the commander always says, the merc has a double edged sword for a reason. One to the enemy, the other for other professionals.”

Everyone around the table shared another chuckle. He of course spoke about the practice that many mercenary companies engaged in when fighting amongst one another. Striking to kill or injure was frowned upon. The objective was to get paid, not die for a cause or your client. There was therefore a shared professional courtesy to treat warfare like sparring when it came to mercenary companies

battling it out on the field. Nobleman would see the spectacle as a poor show of skill and general incompetence, but that would just be them looking out on the world through completely different lens of reality.

But when it came to outsiders a sellsword's blade took the lives of others with ease just as easily as any zealous true believer or duty-bound knight.

“I could do without those Bannermen skulking about,” the young man finally spoke up.

“Just stay out of their way, kid,” the square faced man grunted as he caught his first card flying from the fat man's hands.

“I heard there were a few cuties mixed in with em though,” The fat man grinned lecherously as the last card of the final pair left his pudgy fingers.

“Still wouldn't try it,” the kid warned the pig-man.

“And that's one of the reasons why you're losing now.” The van dyke sporting man replied. “No backbone with this kid... Put up or shut up.”

“No, I'm serious,” he snapped back. “I talked with another guy in the other company. He heard about a guy from another from the Fellow Fields outfit who tried coming onto the littlest one among em.”

“The one no taller than fifteen hands?” The mohawk man asked. “She got a pretty face alright. Far eastern like, the slut showing her thighs off with that weird dress, right?”

“I'd deep fry my pork with her, if ya catch my drift,” The fat man joked. “Finish it off with my special sweet sauce.”

Another chuckle was shared around the table accompanied with the smacking of lips. The men around the table checked their cards and began to raise. Mohawk crossed his arms across his chest, leaned back on his chair's back legs and continued to listen. The fat man didn't stop laughing as he dealt and revealed the first river card.

“Like I was saying,” the kid continued. “He tried making a move, and she clear snapped his jaw in two pieces, at the chin, and with one punch at that too. And this is a big guy too. On the way to twenty hands and fifteen stones.”

A malaise of silence descended onto the table for a little less than ten seconds.

“Yeah, right,” the fat man boasted. “She can't weigh more than seven stone. No little girl could crack a man's jaw like that. And that's if she had a hammer, let alone with bare hands.”

Another river card was revealed and everyone raised and no one folded.

“That's the thing, Hans,” the kid leaned in with his arrogant and boisterous nature having returned to him.

He recanted the tale like any other campfire ghost story.

“They said there was a flash of blue light on impact. It ain't natural.”

“Oh!” The bearded man raised his voice. “I heard of that before. That's that chi thing, right?”

“That's a type of tea, you bloody idiot!” Herald's voice echoed in from the storeroom.

“Shut up, ya sore loser and keep counting!” The bearded man screamed back as he violently stood up and nearly sent his chair flying backward.

The final river card was revealed and everyone glared intently at one another. They continued their story, and their back and forth, but their eyes scanned for any weakness in the others.

“A-anyway,” The square faced man spoke and cleared his throat a little. “Leave those types alone... Sometimes it's hard to tell em apart from the monsters... Let'em continue skulk around the joint and find whatever it is they're looking for. Getting into pointless scraps with em is meaningless.”

“But Ronald, the one in the fancy dress with the big black drills in her hair—” Hans said with a creepy smile spreading across his face. “I want her to sit on my face. She can spank me with that staff too, if that gets her going.” The laugh coming out of his triple chins sounded more like oinking.

“You still owe me an ounce of silver from the last game,” Ronald sighed, “I'm not about to let ya end up roasting on an open fire

when she lights your ass up. Now, I raise ya'll four silver pieces."

"Forget that," the bearded man said and tossed his cards aside.

The ground suddenly rumbled. The flagons of nearly forgotten mead rattled against the table as the minor earthquake shook the whole room. The Mohawk man lost his balance and fell over backward. Everyone would have laughed at him, had they not been taken off guard and terrified as well. And as suddenly as it began, it ended.

A hanging oil lantern kept swinging back and forth above them, the sole reminder of what just happened. There had been little knocked over despite the quaking ground.

"Hans—" Ronald whispered. "I know you get nervous, but that was a bit extreme, even for you."

"Sod off!" Hans oinked back. "You know how sensitive I am about that... And besides, that wasn't me."

A clatter, bang and a smash echoed in from the storeroom after the brief silence. Then that silence returned once more.

"H-herald?" The kid's squeaky voice cracked as he called out to their unseen companion.

"Herald! You lazy bastard, you speak when spoken to!" Ronald bellowed.

But there was no reply.

"Jerry, get your ass in there and see if he's okay."

"Screw that! You're in chard, so you go!" Jerry, the kid, fired back.

"Aw, shad up," The bearded man groaned. "I'll go check on him."

And without further fanfare, the man pushed his chair out at the end of the table and nonchalantly made his way into the other room. He grabbed a spare lantern, cranked on the oil and turned the idle flame to a portable torch. No one went back to the game, they opted to listen closely. And so they heard the second crash and bang followed by more silence. What struck them most of all was the total lack of a

scream or even a yelp.

“Hey! What's going on in there!” Hans shouted into the darkness.

“We got a game to finish here. If you're not dead, you better get your sorry asses in here before I have to kill you myself!” Ronald shouted afterward.

But there was not response.

“Oh, boy. And do you ever suck at this,” came a girly voice from an unexpected angle.

The eyes of the four men snapped back to the end of the table. Someone had taken the van dyke's chair. She was child size and not nearly tall enough to sit in it properly. Rather, she sat on it knees first while leaning forward to spy on Jerry's cards. Sparse lantern light illuminated a pair of inhuman green eyes and locks of silver and brown hair tied up in a pair of twintails. What struck them most of all were the horns and goat skulls adorning her head. The hooves and paws came a close second. Her scanty choice of dress came last, despite their horn dogging a couple minutes ago.

“Wha—“ Ronald sprung into action first, but didn't get further than a grunt and getting out of his chair.

The little monster girl fell back down into her seat, and with barely any effort, kicked the table. But with that seemingly insignificant exertion of force, the heavy oaken table was sent flying end over end and slammed into the burly squared faced man. Not even his muscular bulk was enough to stop its momentum as they were both sent crashing into the wall —near the door— behind him.

Cards, alcohol and coins went flying in every direction. The other three fell back in their chairs and either lay there shocked or tried to scatter. Ronald ended up on the wrong side of the table and wall, but never got a chance to pull himself from under it before another great force crushed him underneath. With a quick and bombastic motion a monster appeared from the doorway as opposed to out of thin air. A giant green wyvern with pinkish hair that dug her talons into the table and pinned the man behind it. She pressed so hard the man could hardly breath and so he quickly passed out a few moments later.

Hans and the Mohawked one scrambled to flee for the exit, but a third girl materialized from the shadows. They caught a gist of an

afterimage before the girl with insect qualities and shoulder length brown hair shot out from behind and blocked their hasty retreat. That didn't —or rather couldn't— stop Hans and he moved as if to use his bulk and momentum to barrel on through. But he was met with an axe-kick which moved so swiftly, that when it slammed into the underside of his chin, it lifted the portly man off his feet. Hans was sent reeling back and flipping backward. Inertia kept him going, the girl deftly stepped out of the way as the man's girth made a full one and a half rotation before collapsing unconscious in the doorway, effectively sealing half the door frame.

Mohawk skidded to a stop, but before he could change directions, a paw grabbed hold of the well groomed and gelled hairs sticking out the back of his head. There was nothing he could do as the improbable strength of the little girl yanked him back and then tossed him to the side into a nearby cabinet. The wooden furniture, housing a vast collection of beer-steins, folded in half and the two collapsed into a heap on the floor. The little demon shook and brushed the loose strands of ginger hair that were ripped free from his scalp.

That left Jerry the Kid. All three of the monsters turned their eyes toward him and so he ran. Not toward the storeroom, that would be suicide. Not toward the exit, Hans was blocking it with his girth and there was the insect standing guard. He made a break for the annex which his thin frame could squeeze through all the cluttered mess of boxes and sacks of grain to freedom. Yet he could not take more than three strides before his legs gave way. His adrenaline surged muscles turned to jelly. There was no apparent reason; it merely happened. His face hit the stone floor and his body skidded to a halt. An acute sensation of suffocation overtook him as well. Not only were his legs numb, he couldn't expand his chest enough to fill his lungs with air. He lay on the ground, writhing and panicking for air. The best he could do was roll over onto his side and gasp for air.

He was rewarded with the sight of three more figures emerging from the shadows of the storeroom. The first was heralded by jingling chains and the clank of a metal staff against stone. An ornate and foreign looking symbol and apparatus at its head glowed with a silver light and looking into it directly sapped even more of his strength. His whole body felt as though it lost its skeleton and he'd disperse into a puddle on the ground. What the boy would never fathom, is the hex placed upon him by the priestess with the extraordinarily long black hair, canine ears and paws.

After her came what he recognized as a lizardman. Even he had heard of the type. They were more oft than not traveling

sellswords like himself. But this one was different. Her scales were a crimson red, as was the long flowing pony tail trailing behind her. Her scaly tail was wreathed in a living fire, the particulars of which baffled the poor boy. But all that was of little consequence, she was dragging two grown men by the back of their collars into the room. She tossed them together into a pile as though they were sacks filled with rubbish and rubbed her hands clean of the dirt and grime with an eager and child-like smile on her face.

Lastly, the sound of steel toes and heel marched into the room. Amongst the women, was a man. With scruffy and unwashed brown hair and glittering dark blue eyes. A rather tall man that the others all quickly looked back to as if waiting for both praise, or their next order. The man's eyes scanned the room and spotted Jerry. He tried to slink away, but the man mercilessly strode forward, the clink of his boots ringing in his ears as one half of his head remained virtually glued to the floor. The man stood over him, while he himself was helpless, and watched as he squat down in front of him.

“I got a couple questions for you.”

Chapter 97

A lone flickering light struggled to illuminate the room adjacent to the warehouse, but its weak halo of light which oozed out from the doorframe appeared to me like a lighthouse's beacon. Rose's fiery tail swept away that dying light as she swaggered into the room with two unconscious mercenaries in tow. Neither stood a chance given the terrible lighting. Having a contingency plan for when part of the floor opens up to reveal an ancient cave system ferrying an infiltration party of dangerous monster girls would be too much to expect from anyone.

After the cacophony occurring in front of me, I took my first step from the storehouse into the keep's dungeon. My boot immediately stepped into a puddle of spilled beer and sent a ripple racing across the room. I witnessed all sorts of crushed debris laying in my path. Strewn about was a mess of playing cards, broken plates, wasted food, discarded flagons and misplaced coins. Laying about were the KO'ed men who were a minute ago peacefully assembled around what used to be a table. I listened to the sound of leather tearing as the soles ripped free of sticky floor and the steeled toes clanged against the stone.

The girls quickly fanned out and got to work. Chris stood guard at the door where a rather rotund man lay flat out on the floor. Her eyes would piece through the darkened hallways and block any

attempt to sneak past. Minte unrolled lengths of rope she had gathered then coiled around her arms. She busied herself with restraining the K.O.-ed guards. Rose and Shoshanah flanked my sides as I approached the lone boy who lay helpless on the ground before me. The latter held the boy captive with a hex, the other grinned and cracked her knuckles with anticipation.

Ba'el... began collecting the coins off the ground with sparkles in her eyes.

Meanwhile, the boy who looked at least a few years younger than I writhed and tried to retreat as I approached. Shoshanah's golden staff continued to radiate with a dull greyish light, the light of a rather potent hex. A sort of magic spell is how she explained it to me. It worked more like a curse though. This one in particular sapped its victim's strength and made their muscles unresponsive. The wide eyed terror from the boy who could no longer muster an ounce of strength from his arms and legs said it all.

Our time would no doubt be limited. Three days had come and gone after our encounter within that crypt. Apparently that many days were supposed to have passed since the Brightkeep had been seized. We were spared one day to rest before setting out, and it was then that Hyria told us what we would expect once leaving those catacombs behind.

The old throne is seized. Scoundrels lurk the halls and vandals hunt for its treasures. Take the Void Crystal to its final rest place and the way will be clear. Banish this seal, this curse, and you will be rewarded with answers to the questions you hold near.

That's what she whispered to me and I recalled those words of her's while I approached our waking prisoner. Hyria spent what little time we had to recuperate whispering to the others. I didn't have the time nor the heart to press them for what the princess said to each of them, but I saw their resolve steel. Every one of them became determined to see this mission through. Remaining lost and starving to death in the catacombs also helped our focus and speed us along. But complaining about that, and perhaps getting even, would have to wait till later.

With my eyes locked onto his, I made sure my voice remained stern.

“I got a couple questions for you.”

After a few seconds of stunned silence had passed, the boy seemed ready to speak.

“Go to the Hells, y-you don't scare me,” he said with a shaky voice.

His eyes darted about in a manner that convinced otherwise. Now the allotted time before shit inevitably hit the fan was half a minute shorter than before, so I decided that playing the bad guy would have to do.

“You're probably feeling a bit helpless already... But you should know that's just the start. You can hardly feel your arms and legs. Like your being drained. A tingly feeling crawling up your veins.”

His eyes, full of false defiance, turned back up to me. He tried to push himself away again, but the wall was right behind him now. He couldn't muster the sense to look back, so he seemed to mistake it for the air itself putting up more resistance than he could overcome.

“You ever hear what happens to someone when they are terrified?... Happens to be something they do right before they die. The body goes limp. Its bladder and bowls... empty on all their own.”

The puddle as it stretched across the floor behind me like an amoeba. It wormed its way past me and soaked into the boy's pants. I could feel Susan's perplexed gaze burrow into the back of my head, but I continued. My eyes drooped low toward the floor and punk's eyes followed. They shot open with terror. In the heat of the moment, he didn't put two and two together and realize it was a puddle of beer spilling around his crotch. A weak cough, a scream that died in the back of his throat, escaped his agape mouth.

“Now, the next thing that happens with a spell like this... You get so weak. Your heart will— Just. Stop. Beating.”

Now I could hear Shoshanah sigh behind me. I didn't doubt for a minute she'd agree with this kind of tactic, but we really didn't know how long our element of surprise would last. We knew that sneaking into this keep might surround us with well over a hundred armed men. I'd like to avoid a repeat of our misadventure on the barge, stranded in the middle of the lake. So next part would be crucial. Should I asked the wrong question, the punk might catch onto how little we actually knew. He might figure out that he actually held all the cards. All he'd have to do is say nothing and the likelihood we'd stumble into a hundred of his friends went up dramatically. Or they'd maneuver while

we were busing beating that information out of him. But that's if he were the self-sacrificing type...

Besides, the face the punk made showed me that did the trick. I figured we'd start things off being vague. Let him fill in the blanks and go from there.

“Where is the captain?” I bellowed.

“I-I don't know! Last I saw him, he ordered us to count stock for—”

A good start. But I had other ideas and a need to keep him off balance.

“Not your captain! Where are you keeping the captain of the watch?”

“Wha—“

I grabbed the boy by the front of his shirt and lifted him off the floor.

“The Keep's commander!” I screamed at him.

“Wh- Who in the hells are you?”

“We're the ones asking the questions here!” Rose sounded off, but with a tone that sounded more as if she were cheerleading.

Her playful tone, however, belied her actions. She stepped forward and grabbed the punk by the collar of his gambeson and lifted him off the floor. Rose's claws sunk deep into the padded cloth and soon his legs were dangling just above the floor. The kid had the baby face of someone not quite out of high school age, so his scrawny body and stringy muscles didn't offer much resistance. The salamander had no trouble doing a standing bench curl and then lifting the punk higher up into the air.

“Easy there, Rose,” I said and placed my hand on her shoulder.

“R-rose?” he gurgled and looked down with bulging eyes. “Rosette? The Thorn Knight!?”

And so her reputation proceeded her again. I shouldn't be surprised given this guy, for as young as he looks, is in the same line

of business that she is. Rose said nothing in return, but gave the guy an ever wider grin. Her tail glowed a little brighter than before and a few embers crackled off it as those claws dug into the padded cloth scrunched tighter around the punk's neck.

“Locked away! Along with the rest of the p-poor saps!” he blubbered, mucus now streaming down his nose.

His eyes swung back and forth between Rose's playful and dangerous grin and myself. Rose's distaste for such a weak answer mirrored my own. She tossed the punk down into a nearby chair that had survived the previous carnage. It nearly tipped over backward, so I had to quickly stomp my foot down between his legs to keep him still.

“Locked away where?” I growled, grinding my foot against the chair which creaked and cracked under the force.

My boot missed the family jewels by at most a centimeter. His limp body couldn't stop himself from slowly slipping off. It wouldn't do so right away though, he'd slide off feet first. What would be at the vanguard of that involuntary migration? His eyes kept shooting down and then back up, so I figured he knew what was in store.

“In the kennels! They were empty! This place had a skeleton garrison at best,” he gave a nervous and wry smile at his own pun before his panic quickly returned. “The place where they keep the hounds and livestock, the room at the other end of this level's tunnel!”

“That is quite enough,” Susan sighed.

With a wave of her staff, the light glowing at its head died. The punk's body shuddered as his strength came back to him. His body clung to the chair on reflex in an effort to stop sliding off.

“It appears the soldiers garrisoning this keep were spared,” she added.

One act of mercy for another, is that how it is? I'm sure that's what Susan tried getting at. I removed my boot from the chair and stepped back.

“I-I don't know anything else!” He pleaded. “I joined the outfit last summer. Was with em for some business in the south west marshes before. Then the commander got a job offer. Lots of cash upfront, we didn't ask no questions.”

“At least one company,” Rose said. “A hundred swords, maybe two.”

I caught him grimace in my peripheral vision. So much for that being everything he knew, huh?

“Your services were hired to blither about in the dark?” Susan asked, raising an eyebrow.

Susan's turn to approach was at hand. With gold chains jingling and the staff's metal rod making a rhythmic clang against the floor as she moved to the front.

“W-we're in reserve! Our outfit's other company, along with the Feldwin Outfit... and with those Bannermen too.”

“Bannermen—” the word slipped through my clenched teeth.

“So we're up to about a thousand men,” Rose said and let out a deep breath. “Throw in some adventuring types on top of that.”

The image of the scarred man came to mind.

“The one from the Count's ball,” I said and looked over at Rose who nodded.

She shrugged and raised her claws up, “Him and twenty of his friends, or so.”

Not like we haven't run into a dozen of them before... But those were more like the interns, the mall cops of this PMC industry. Still, hearing that they were here in this very keep was important to know. We would have to conduct ourselves differently. If there were ten or twenty of those magic shield wielding knights around, the situation had gotten much worse.

Instead of the gravity of the situation weighing down on Rose she grinned and said, “Now this oughta be a lot of fun. Even those rookie banner guys can put up a fight as good as three or four grunts smushed together. Redeemers too.”

“And they are something like a penal legion, right?”

Rose punched me in the arm, hard. It nearly spun me around too.

“Oh Laven, this isn't the time for that,” she giggled and

blushed.

“Penitentiary! Punitive!” Susan barked back.

But a glaze of confusion soon set across Rose's face instead.

“But this place is supposed to be sacred though, right?”

And she had already moved on before Susan and I could set her straight.

Rose turned toward Susan and I to ask. “These guys got to have some serious stones on them to pull this kind of stunt if that's how it is.”

“I heard it's got something like three fifths of all the supplies in the whole Duchy hidden away here.” The punk spilled the beans with an eager bargaining look upon his face. “That's what I managed to pick out,” he added with a smile.“That Duke's gonna run out right fast. That's the idear I got out of it... But that's all I got, honest!” He cried, the pleading face giving way to desperation. “So please, don't eat me!” He blubbered.

I had to fight against my urge to laugh. I had never encountered anything that was prepared to eat me this whole time. I see that story still floats around. After all, it'd be in the interests of those trying to keep order. I looked over to Susan with a shrug and she returned the gesture with a nod. That told me more than enough. So far as the Anubis could tell, the punk told the truth. Her polygraphic sixth sense hadn't steered us wrong before.

Crack!

The loud snapping sound caused Susan and I to jump. My neck went rigid and Suan's ears and tail stood on end. We swung around and saw Rose armed with a broken chair leg in her claw and the guy slumped over in the chair.

“Rose!?” Susan and I shouted in unison.

“What? We were finished, weren't we?.. And everyone else got to knock one out, everyone but me.” Rose declared nonchalantly, with a slight pout, while tossing the broken stick aside.

The guy didn't appear to be dead. There is a rather large bump forming out of the top of his head, but he seemed otherwise in one

piece.

“We don't know for sure if that's all he had to say. There's no need to knock out a defenseless man like that!”

Hmph,” Rose turned her face away and pouted.

Susan couldn't muster anything to chastise Rose with. We'd need to restrain him eventually, and this would make it easier. If he weren't going to wake up for a while, that would mean a possible escape by he and his friends would less likely. The amount of sympathy we could afford these dolts was very limited. We were probably running contrary to a few playbooks that would claim killing them now would be for the best. Yet I could not bring myself to do so.

Susan and I appeared to be alike in mind on this. Our eyes met once more and we offered one another an apathetic shrug.

“At the very least, Rose endeavors to maximize their utility... Unlike SOME gathered here,” Susan growled and turned toward Ba'el.

Ba'el had been busy the whole time, on her paws and knees, grubbing all the coins now scattered around the room. She only bothered to look up when she could sense the rays of hate beam of the priestess' eyes.

“Well, excuse me!” She shouted back with indignation. “When this is all over, I'd like to gather up and replenish my inventory of magical reagents. Not that you'd understand, since you get all the bag of tricks you need from your celestial sugar daddy.”

“W-w-w-w-what did thou dare insinuate!?” Susan screamed back, the hairs on her tail now standing on end.

“Ya heard me! Some of us gotta work for our cantrips. Not beg their sky daddy. And another thing, if you're worried about being useful, there are things I need to tinker with that are outside the food budget. Especially with these two broads around,” she said while thrusting her thumbs at Chris and Rose.

Those two girls appeared oblivious when they looked back at Ba'el. Somehow they managed to sense they were being talked about, but not what the little demon was trying to get at.

“I'll have you know, the prayers and rites are a long honored tradition. Their recitation taking centuries to master and are feats

whose imitation are above such lowly crass beasts such as yourself," Susan said, twisting the short joke with an especially smug expression. "Far more refined than your eye of newt and toe of frog."

"Fuck you! Newt eyes and frogs' tails are just are time honored traditions too" Ba'el screeched back while jabbing her index claw into the air in front of Suan's face.

And there came the sparks. Locked in a vicious state down, baring their fangs at one another. I looked over to Rose and then toward the poor guy with his tongue hanging out and a huge bump which now poked out past his hair line. My eyes swept back over to the juvenile bickering before turning back to Rose again, who met my eyes with her usual smile along with a pair of inquisitive eyes.

"I take it back," I said. "Thanks for knocking him out."

Someone watching this shameless scene is something I'd rather not see become a rumor. We managed to pump as much information so easily based solely on reputation.

"Eh heh heh," Rose chuckled and blushed while scratching the back of her head. "And a 'good job' to you too. You were so forceful."

Rose cradled her cheeks in her claws and her hips writhed back and forth as her eyes closed. Her imagination ran wild behind her eyelids. Her eyelids fluttered a couple times in my direction and I had to quickly avoid direct eye contact.

And at the other end of the room, Chirs stood guard while Minte had finished restraining the other mercenaries. Ankles tied together with their arms tied behind their backs... Except for the fat one. His ankles and wrists were tied together like a hog. I sear I could spot the smirk on Minte's face as if she were secretly laughing at her own joke. By the time I shook my head and looked back she had already moved on and got to work anchoring the punk to chair beside Rose and I.

"No one on the approach, halls are clear," Chris declared and stepped back from the doorway. "Our virtuous mission has begun with no hiccups!"

"A little good news is always welcome," I said.

"Tis a welcome change," Susan complained.

“We don't have much time,” Rose interjected. “Someone is gonna come checking on these lugs sooner rather than later. We're gonna need a better position if we're duke it out.”

“If we're lucky it might not come to—“

I turned to look and see Rose already sulking and making a pouting face.

“Look, I said it was likely we'd have to fight, but that doesn't mean we have to—“

Our mission is to liberate Yalerian crown treasures from the grasp of the Bannermen. I am certain they will not liberate them easily,” Chris said.

“Yeah yeah!” Rose jumped up and patted Chris on the back. “Exactly. And if we happen to run along some mercs on the way—“

“Narrow halls,” Minte spoke up. “Poor lighting. Stone carries sound. Outnumbered greatly and choke-points with high possibility of being isolated from escape routes. Not viable. Our mission is undermanned.”

“Aww, come on, Minte. Help me out here~” Rose said while slithering up to Minte and putting her into something between a mix of a hug and a headlock.

“Still not advised,” the assassin said, unfazed by Rose's aggressive skinship.

It was a good thing Minte could be level-headed enough to cool the heads of Chris and Rose off. But being undermanned is actually the least of all my concerns. When thinking over how we could fight our way through the keep with the six of us, there's one thought that kept coming back to me ever since leaving the crypt.

“Laven,” Susan called me, fresh from her fight with Ba'el. “You appear to have a thought to share.”

Despite sparring with Ba'el Susan remained astute as always.

“Yeah. This job is too big for us... But that's why I wanted to know from that guy what exactly happened to the Keep's garrison... Wouldn't it be a shame for the Count if they somehow got free?”

All five girls went silent and exchanged looks. I didn't think the idea was that far out there, but perhaps it was to them. And now that I thought about it from their perspective, and not just mine, a group of knights with a sworn oath to guard this place at all costs against the hordes of monstrous undead might also put them onto the list or targets by association. That might explain the look on all their faces.

“That might be crazy enough to work,” Ba'el said, stroking her chin.

“Tis a risky proposition. Should the Keep's men decide the Count and his mercenaries are a lesser evil,” Susan mused.

“After taking a look at these guys, Ha!” Rose laughed. “I doubt it. All those hoighty-toighty knightly types can't stand sell swords. You think they're gonna trust em to watch over their wall?”

“They are oath bound to defend the wall, I am sure they will see our goals align, if only for now,” Chris said and thumped her chest with conviction.

I looked over the Minte, the last silent one. She had her eyes closed as she thought about it long and hard. The girl tried mustering any argument to play devil's advocate, but in the end she opened her eyes with the slightest hint of smile and nodded.

And our plan was set. We arranged our marching order and put Minte far out in front. I watched as her back melted into the darkness of the hallway outside. Chris took the lead and with her eyes we'd cut down on the light we'd need... Ignoring what Rose would radiate, but there wasn't much in the way of controlling that right now. That's why Rose took up the rear guard while Susan and Ba'el flanked me both sides.

For a fortress that is supposed to be crawling with a thousand sell-swords, the eerie silence concerned me. Everywhere I looked I saw the subtle hints that these lengths of cobbled stone had seen a lot of traffic until very recently. Spending quite a few days below in that abandoned crypt made me more sensitive to the dust that everyone sloughs off on a daily basis. Those halls that had not seen a living thing in centuries were barren, but these had the dirty musk of life all over it. A few sparse torching at the end of their life cycles leaving much of the tunnel caked in shadows didn't help much either.

“I expected there to be a patrol or two,” I whispered under my breath.

“A team of sappers is the last thing they'd expect down here,” Rose's voice reassured me from behind.

“All the action is topside,” Ba'el's bored voice mumbled. “One sweep to clear it out and then you stop worrying about it. So let's not jinx it, okay?”

I could not for the life of me banish the sense of pessimism that I had become accustomed to. Perhaps Hyria had truly delivered us into the one sweet spot inside the Brightkeep, but it didn't make sense to me to have so few men guarding these halls. If that punk was to be believed, the dungeon where they had gathered the remaining knights and soldiers who originally watched over this place should be nearby. Why were they not more cautious and keep a firm vigilance?

I thought that storehouse was massive, rivaling the size of a big-box store, but I see now that it's merely an offshoot of a much larger installation. My eyes could barely pierce through the dark, but I could soon tell by keeping track of my footsteps. If it were the same distance in the opposite direction, this one level laying deep beneath the actual tower itself had to cover at least a two hundred meters squared. I had not laid my eyes on it from the outside, but it must tower over the land to have a foundation such as this. IT certainly has lasted the test of time since its been around for more than two thousand years.

“Minte is up ahead,” Chris announced.

“She has located the dungeon. Let us make haste,” Susan said.

The girls quickly took positions around the door and prepared to breach it. I stood in front and wondered if there really was a need to be so dramatic.

“Hold on. Maybe—“

I grabbed hold of the handle and gave it a push. The mechanism gave way without resistance and the hinges swung without issue. Everyone else deflated with what I suspected was a sense of anticipation. The door revealed a short set of stairs. I took the initiative and went on ahead with the other girls close behind.

Below looked like a rather standard guard room complete with another two stairways down to yet another two levels. It was only then

that I could feel the faint whispers of distant voices. Along with the wash of warm air that slapped me in the face after the dingy cold air of the caverns, it was then I knew we had finally arrived.

“Come to check in? Been all too quiet and easy so far,” A man's voice called out from my left blindspot.

My heart jumped and my body spun around to a desk and a chair. Reclined, and hidden mostly behind the desk, appeared a lone mercenary A hat rested over his face, but I saw the glint of steel on his waist; the hilt of a sword waiting in its scabbard. Beside him waited a rather fat rope leading further up into the ceiling before vanishing into a small hole about the size of a can of soup. My intuition screamed that it was some sort of alarm.

“You still got, what, an hour before your shift? And if you think you can rat on me to the boss that I slept on the job... Don't forget that I—”

He quickly tipped the brim of his hat up and our eyes met. What must have been a mere half second felt more like a minute.

“Who the hell are?”

His reclined body began to stir, but I seized the advantage. While his body tried to shift out of first gear, I had already reached third. I lunged forward, vaulted over the desk as if sliding across a car's hood and clenched my fist. His right arm crossed over and grabbed the hilt of his sword, but that left him open since his left arm was nowhere to be seen when I flung all my strength at him. The sound of a crunching jaw bounced off the claustrophobic walls and the chair the man tried to jump up from shot out from under him. Without it being there to break his fall, the guard was sent flying backward and slammed the back of his head on the stone floor.

I flexed my hand as the shock of the impact rattled through my bones and pulsed through my muscles. Somehow I managed to forget these steel casing gothic gauntlets. The smooth feeling of fine leather gloves rubbed against the palms of my hands, but I spied the speck of red blood now painting the steel joints covering the knuckles.

The girls piled into the room from behind and secured the room. Minte and Chris surging forward to descend upon the knocked out guard in front of me.

Rose let out a whistle as she peered over the desk, “Nice. A

solid crack. I'll give that one a seven out of ten."

"Laven, please, let us take the lead in the future," Susan said with an air of chastisement.

"Nonsense!" Rose shouted. "Look at welt!"

While Rose and Susan were having their disagreement — mostly Susan trying to calm Rose down as she flushed red and once again began squirming like a school girl—. Minte gave the thumbs up that the poor sod had indeed been sent to the cleaners. All that adrenaline built up in the span of a second now deflated my whole body. I could taste the iron in the back of my throat as I swallowed a lump of air down my throat.

Chris fumbled to gather up his sword in her claws and tossed it toward me. I almost wasn't prepared to catch it, but scrambled and managed to get my hands wrapped around the sheath.

"For safe keeping," Chris said with a wink.

I guess this made things a bit safer is everything went south. Besides, we didn't have any more rope to keep this guy restrained if he woke up sooner rather than expected. I tied the leather strap around my waist and looked back up to see the girls' waiting faces.

"Let's go see how our new friends are doing," I said with a wry and forced smile.

It was decided I would take the lead again. I descended the right stairwell into the dungeon. My footsteps must carry well, because the sound of murmuring suddenly died. By the time I walked in front of the first set of iron bars, the whole world had become deathly quiet.

That awkward silence persisted well after I met the stares coming from about fifty men crammed into a prison cell. If they wanted to lay down, they'd have to cram in like sardines and the odor of them having been shoved in there for the last three days hit my sinuses like a freight train. I didn't spot any immediate signs of starvation or dehydration, thankfully, but the horrid stench of some unseen yet undoubtedly overflowing chamberpot and unwashed clump of men would soon be a breeding ground for disease.

"You're not the guard," a raspy voice called out from the crowd. "Who in the hells are you?"

An older middle aged man split the crowd like a sea and stood tall despite the cramped space. A pair of brown eyes peered out from his overhanging eyebrows which were as thick as a forest. He had all the airs of a proud military man. His body wore the signs of age, along with a receding hairline, but his frame bulged with muscles and scars from a lifetime of service. An otherwise noble aura was betrayed by the accumulating gray stubble and grimy dirt covering he and his filthy padded jacket and trousers.

"I've been getting that question a lot," I joked in an effort to lighten the mood.

The stare I got in return gave me the hint that wasn't going to fly right now.

I coughed to clear my throat and tried again, "The name is Laven. I'm here on behalf..."

Now this I had to word right.

"...On behalf of a supporter of Duke Malco."

All the other men exchanged glances with one another and a low grumble roiled about in hushed whispers.

"And the lazy son of a bitch up there?"

"Hey! He gave his name, your supposed to give yours now," Rose's voice protested as she appeared behind me.

And all those hushed whispers erupted into gasps and shouts. Nearly every one of them tried to step back and get some distance, but there wasn't anywhere for them to go. Their leader, and a few others I could count on my fingers, stood their ground. They threw murderous glances instead of recoiling in surprise.

"Devil spawn—" the older man snarled while wrapping his hands around the iron bars till his knuckles turned white. "How dare you defile this place with your presence. You and your incubus!"

"Whoa, hold on there," I flailed my hands and tried to reign in the situation before it got out of control. "She's not off the reservation —"

I stopped myself short. They were the ones in the cage, not us. I puffed out my chest and exaggerated my posture to square off with

the man I assumed were these prisoners' leader.

“If you'd all rather rot in those cells, then by all means, be my guest. Otherwise, how about you show a little god damn common courtesy?”

The old man and I glared at one another for a while longer. His eyes kept sweeping back to Rose too.

“Our time is short, come on, friends!” Came Chris' bellowing voice.

And so the wyvern lumbered through the opening and towered behind me. Another fresh wave of shock rippled through the prisoners, but their reaction was far less animated than before. Chris' appearance did get a reaction out of the old man. His hands released the iron bars from his death grip and he took a single step back, so he his eyes could fit Chris in all at once.

“A dragoon?” The old man grumbled. “Domdracverian?”

Chris watched the man with a blank expression for a moment before coming back life. Bigger than life, as usual.

“Christophaclies, Handmaiden to Her Majesty Violetta Wyrm The First, Dragoon to Laven, Lord of the Northern Wastes and Champion of Justice!”

Oh god, please no. Not with this whole wasteland business again. I nearly buried my face in my hands, but salvaged my posture by tucking my fist under my chin and looking away.

“Then you are familiar with Anton Rissler?” the man asked.

Chris froze in place during her extravagant posing and looked at the man with a blank look on her face.

“The captain of the Royal Guard?” She asked, meekly.

“So he's come a long way then...” The man said with a sigh and closed his eyes. “He is doing well then?

“He was still alive last I saw him, if that's what you are asking,” I said.

It appears the man had finally calmed down.

“Rissler and I attended the same Military Academy in the Southern Cape Marches. That had to be almost thirty years ago... It is good to hear he is well.”

Another lofty silence hung over our heads until he finally mustered the words.

“I am Sten Magnusven, Knight Commander of the Brightkeep. As my father was before me, and his father's father.”

Although Sten finally relinquished his name, the man offered no hand to shake, nor business smile to break the ice. His words were kept to a bare minimum. I could almost taste the hesitation to show any friendly gesture to those he still considered possible enemies. And I could see that look in his eyes spell it out for me.

“Now, how in the hells did you three manage to get in here? That is if you are not working for those cursed sell sword and here merely to torment us further.”

“Six in total, to be precise,” Susan said as it was her turn to revealed herself.

“But if ya want an answer to that question—” Ba'el spoke from the doorway, leaning against it and refusing to enter. “—It would be better if we refrained.”

Hearing about a backdoor like that may be too much to digest at the moment. I had to agree with her discretion.

“Let's call it a trade secret,” the demon said with a joking smile.

“In exchange, how about we get you all out of there.”

“And why, on Almighty's green earth, would you want to do that?” Sten said threateningly, wrapping his hands around the iron bars once more. “And where's the sixth?”

“Around,” I said, checking the corners of the room and back up the stairs. “She's a bit on the shy side and will appear when she's actually needed... And I figured you all had a plan at a counter-attack if you could manage to get out of there.”

“Is this a rescue mission orchestrated by this unnamed benefactor of my lord?”

"...No," I said. "That information is confidential."

"As requested," Susan added.

" But we figured the best chance for our success is to give you and your men a chance to resecure the Brightkeep."

"You best repeat yourself less vaguely," Sten said as his expression became grim.

So he wasn't going to but it, huh? I suppose I'd have to resort to some white lying.

"Those adventurers are tearing the place up looking for something, right? We are here to make sure they don't find what they are looking for."

In truth, the mission is to return this void crystal to its proper resting spot. My best guess is that place was in the throne room of this tower. But fighting our way up there with only the six of us would be next to impossible... But with the help of Sten and his men, perhaps we had a chance. There were fifty here and I could hear the stirrings of others waiting in cells further down the row as they pained to listen in on what we were talking about out of sight.

"Yeah, we tried that once already," one of Sten's men, sitting with his back up against the wall, spoke up. "Managed to snag one of this bastards when he strayed too close to the bars. Couple of us grabbed hold of him and beat the shit out of him something good..."

"Yet he did not keep the cell door keys with him," said another.

"Quiet!" Sten bellowed and silenced his men. "...What they say is true. Some other officer keeps the keys with him. They return to drag one of my men off to interrogate every so often... At least up until last night. My boys are tight lipped. They must have gotten bored... Or perhaps frustrated."

He cocked his head to the side and motioned toward a group of five injured men with fresh bruises, cuts and broken bones. And that's out of the fifty men in this cell alone.

"Well, let's get to work then. We'll just pry this sucker open!" Rose said with pep.

“Won't happen,” Sten said without hesitation. “These bars aren't any normal iron. Because these ain't kennels or a prison.”

I figured they couldn't be kennels by design the moment I saw them, but I didn't following what he said.

“This is the Brightkeep,” Sten continued. “What was this place built for again? To keep the foul undead out. But sometimes, ya gotta know your enemy. So these were special built a long long time ago to keep whatever freaks we managed to capture caged until preparations were ready to open em up for the scholars to study.”

There's no time for that.

“We've got an hour —at most— before they start sending people down to check up on things,” I said. “There's no time to do this nicely or ask politely for the keys.”

“Hey, Ba'el!” Chris shouted over everything. “How about it?”

The demon sighed and stepped forward to reveal herself at last. Her horns had as much an impression Sten and his men as I expected.

“Yeah yeah, demon spawn this, Almighty compels you that. Cram it for a moment, okay?”

The commander retreated from his post at the other end of the bars as the demon approached it. His eyes had been calm until then, but they flared up with righteous fury once more... I'd have to explain away this one too, wouldn't I? As bad as monsters were to most people, full fledged demons carried a prejudiced against them... I wouldn't go so far as to say it was undeserved.

Ba'el wrapped her paws around a couple bars and rattled them ever so slightly. She didn't commit to using her strength and instead took a moment to analyze the iron. Her eyes also traced up and down from floor to ceiling, where the bars were secured into the structure of the tower itself.

“Okay. Maybe... Maybe I could deal with this, and that would be a stretch.... But~” She teased between squinted eyes as she pondered the possibilities.

“But what?” Susan spat out impatiently.

“These bars aren't going to budge. And unless you want the ceiling coming down when I rip em out, or send a nice alarm bell as subtle as a pig on fire running through an End Week mass when that happens... No dice.”

Ba'el released the bars from her grip and stepped back. She shrugged her shoulders and resigned her services.

“And if you think I'm going to ghost walk every one of them through stone walls that thick; you got another thing coming. I spent that spell already when we got here.”

I began to dread that my plan wouldn't survive infancy, but Rose didn't skip a beat. Although she had been ignored before, the salamander stepped forward. She took her turn at the iron(?) bars and firmly grabbed hold of them. Rose filled her lungs to their max, her chest puffed out as far as it could go, and then went red in the face as she flexed every muscle she had.

Ba'el looked ready to put it through her thick skull —as she would say— but backed off when Rose's tail erupted and sparks flied. Rose didn't strain her arms. They remained perfectly still. The girl wasn't trying to pull the bars apart.

Gray wrought bars turned quickly to orange and red, beginning at where Rose clung. The change in color worked their way up and down till two glowing lengths of that special iron were as tall as a man.

“Minte~” Rose squeezed the name out between grit teeth. “Any time now!”

And from the shadows, the assassin appeared behind Rose. Sten and his men had backed away already, but they tried to take another back at the sudden appearance of the mantis. With a 'snikt', the two arm blades swung into battle position. The green carapace sung as it vibrated against the air. Minte slashed lightning fast four time, two for each arm, before retracting the blades back against her forearms. After the second snikt, the salamander's fire went from bull blast to a mere sizzle. She took a step back and had to catch her breath with claws on her knees. Rose rquired a few heaves to catch her breath before pulling her spine back upright.

Then she pushed the two bars with a single index claw each. Two red hot bars, quickly cooling, fell forward and clattered against the stone floor. Where there had been less than four inches of space

before, there is now almost two feet. I rushed to Rose's side and put my arm around her shoulder to support her. Chris stepped in from behind and offered a wing to wrap around her other shoulder. A warm smile from her face greeted us as she reassured us both that she was okay.

Sven took dared to step forward first and slide his muscled bulk sideways through the tight opening. He turned around and nodded to his men, who sighed with relief and for the first time showered one another with smiles, handshakes and pats on the back.

" I cannot say I approve, but desperate times call for desperate measures. The Count and his crooks must pay for their desecration. If my Duke is to stand a chance, we'll need to score a victory here... You said we had an hour," he said while turning his eyes to me.

Now able to stand free and unbounded by the cage's confines, he stood as tall I me.

"Less than that," I answered.

"We best get to work then. You and your... Friends... Keep to yourself and handle the Bannermen and leave the rest to us."

Chapter 98

Soldiers darted back and forth in a flurry all around me as the liberated Brightkeep Watch prepared themselves for battle. We freed them from their prison Sven had command over no more than a mere six score men. Another thirty or so men languished on makeshift beds. They were either banged up, or in coughing fits from the onset of disease. A handful of them were tenacious 'walking wounded' who struggled through the pain to be of use.

I felt a thin veneer of safety draped over my shoulders with these numbers, but it also came at the cost of their commander's pressure. Myself along with the girls' very existence is hardly tolerated, especially the girls. We were a ruffle in the current circumstance and it put us on separate but equal shit list. An eyesore that may have to be dealt with later, but ignored because of a more pressing concern loomed which loomed over them. They are forced to accept us begrudging as an ally. Magically enchanted iron bars as thick as my arm would still be between them and freedom if not for us.

Sven's knuckles were stained a pearly white as his right hand had a death grip on a kitchen knife. With that knife he so menacingly wielded, he was busy carving a series of shapes into the hardwood table. Besides the hussle all around us, and the scrapping between the two of us, the two of us remained deathly quiet. What I would appreciated is him dialing back on all the antagonism. Maybe a little less edge. I'd settle for being granted a head start after we do our business here in return for saving their damn lives! At the very least he could stop leaving me alone with my thoughts which grew more pessimistic by the minute.

Despite everything I wasn't that concerned for my personal well being. Minte stood guard behind me, and true to her shy nature, hid herself underneath a cloak. It's a strange feeling to feel her presence at all, let alone so forcefully. Thankfully it buttressed me against the commander's own forceful aura and the daggers in his eyes. He had his own small cadre of bodyguards composed of four knights, two flanking him on each side. Those men glared with the same apprehension and their fingers twitched nervously at their hips with no sword hilts to grasp. Minte remained virtually motionless, the only stirrings of life being the tips of her antenna which poked out from the hem of her hood.

To say the situation we were in was a little awkward would be a colossal understandable. And into this mess we six had appeared.

Fresh from the underground and through a sealed door linked directly to the Shadeland catacombs. These glaring flaws in the keep's defenses have no doubt existed for centuries. Let's not forget to mention we had come on behest of that cursed land's ruler. A scion of an ancient and long lost royal line who is head over heels for the very man responsible for her destruction. You know, the very same man who were these knights' liege. The kind of loyalty for him that made one willing to charge headlong into odds that were four to one.

My head hurt whenever I thought about it for too long. But should Sven and his knights learn of the true reason we are here the result would be, in the most literal sense, a splitting headache. So rather than end up on the business end of an axe, the charade must continue. Crossing paths with the Silver Bannermen will no doubt be inevitable as we try to return this crystal artifact to its rightful place, so I'll just stick with the alibi on standby.

We are here to stop those adventurer types from lifting something precious from this keep's treasury, that's the official story. In reality my job was to return something which has been missing from this Duchy's collection for eons. Then —maybe— Hyria will have her hands unbound and put a stop to this madness. Failure on my part will cause needless bloodshed and a heap of chaos. I shudder to think about the nose dive our situation would take if Count Aaron, along with his hired goons, took control of these lands. That's one shit list I knew I was hovering at a close second. Behind only the Duke himself.

As I grimaced over the gears in my head grinding painfully against one another, Sven's expression was grave. His eyes were focused and full of defiance. He stood confidently with her shoulders squared across the table as he carved lines of a makeshift map into the wood with a kitchen knife. We hardly had this moment in time for a war-meeting at all. We'd soon be throwing ourselves toward the upper levels of the keep.

“Our first advantage is that every man here knows the layout of this keep like the back of their hand,” Sven's declared with his gravely voice. “Our unwelcome guests have had about three days worth of getting lost in it.”

“You can add getting lazy on top of that,” I said.

“Even I wouldn't have believed you could manage to get past the bars of those cages so easily. It will take a lot of restore them, but I cannot complain with how things have turned out,” he replied

before stabbing the dagger's tip into the table.

The sharp strip of embedded iron hummed briefly as it vibrated. Each sound-wave caused the marrow in my bones to quiver. I couldn't shake the feeling that on any other day, the commander would have rather buried that in my heart. His eyes slowly turned back up toward me. They radiated with suspicion and it was thick with his spittle as he spoke.

“I too might have dropped my guard as low, considering how miraculous your infiltration was.”

And therein lied the root of his distrust. I could not be an agent of the Count because that would beg to ask why I would have freed him. If his imagination were strong enough, or his intuition potent enough, he may think I was in league with his mortal enemies... and he'd be right. But he could not prove it and could do nothing more but point to the monsters I traveled with. One had the proper papers to legally be in the mercenary trade and another loosely associated with an old friend. With that in mind—

“I'll be keeping that one trade secret... For now,” I said with the best poker face I could muster.

Sven's eyes attempted to burrow holes into me, but his eyes darted back and forth between myself and Minte. Her disappearing and reappearing act outside the cell, which he himself had witnessed, put a damper on that suspicion. But just for the moment.

“We did receive some basic intelligence on the situation, this place's layout and some magical guidance. That's everything I'm at liberty to say,” I said with a shrug. “You should instead be worried about how you plan to take on a force more armed, armored and with the numbers advantage. Shoshanah is hard at work getting more of your men on their feet, but her healing powers are limited.”

Nestled in the corner of the room was a makeshift infirmary. No proper beds, but some cloth for makeshift bedrolls. With her caduceus-like staff, the priestess made her rounds and clasped her paws over various injuries. The tattoos bordering her abdomen glowed a pale green as she did her best to mend whatever wounds she could. For the coughing fits from those with the onset of diphtheria and other diseases from being shoved into steerage like conditions for at least three days. Her staff glowed all the while and thoughts of Nightingale popped into my head... Perhaps that's a story from home she'd enjoy

listening to the next time we have a moment.

But right now we had a battle to win, so I turned back to Sven and continued, “You cannot expect anything more than some healed fractures and stitched up wounds. Those men of yours with broken bones and joins, torn tendons and deep tissue injuries will be sitting this out... If they were more cooperative she might be able to do a little more.”

“These are good Almighty fearing men I command, Laven,” Sven growled.

“And apparently divine powers rely as much on faith as a spell relies on the right magic words.”

I don't think I would get anywhere telling Sven and his men to suck it up. But I still couldn't let go of my indignation. I had to tear myself away from the topic forcefully.

“We can get you a handful of men back on their feet and provide a field medic's support once the operation begins, but we still have another big problem staring back at us.”

Sven didn't need to hear it from me.

“We've done a cursory check of the supplies which have been stolen... And it is as I feared. Weapons, tools and dried medicinal herbs have been cleared out... Everything they could want and certainly everything they could find,” Sven said with the hint of a grin. “Fortune's wheel has a strange way of turning. During our incarceration, a couple of my men were —forthcoming— about a side job they had been engaging in for the past few years. Fortunately, the two of them weren't taken away for interrogation. It's rather hard to get a couple men whose jaws were savagely broken to talk.”

“Smuggling,” I said, my intuition slipped out between pursed lips.

“The Brightkeep is well supplied. A great deal of Yaleria's levied taxes go toward maintaining its structural integrity and its battle preparedness. Sometimes the warehouses are overstocked. It is not all too uncommon for certain items to vanish from inventory catalogs. Selling supplies off for personal profits is not something unknown to the chronicles of this Watch. But now, for the first time, it may save us rather than compromise it.”

“And that's why you asked for the extra muscle from those two?”

I had Rose and Chris head off to assist Sven's men as a gesture of good faith. And on cue, A small train of men lugging large rolled bolts of wool and cloth entered the room. Carrying more than their fair share, Rose and Chris joined them in tossing their cargo into a pile on the floor. Rather than the thud of rolled fabric on stone, the sound of clanking steel echoed about the room. All the men stopped what they were doing and looked over with faces equal parts relived and excited.

Inside each roll were tightly bundled weapons. Swords, axes, maces and all sorts spearheads. It was a harvest of steel.

I also took note of the two lei of sausages hanging around Rose's neck. They didn't stay there for long as she ravaged them on the command of her insatiable hunger. She did burn a lot of fuel weakening those iron bars, so her pigging out wasn't too unexpected... But the sight of those teeth tearing into all that meat made the soldiers take a few steps back. Chris meandered her way over to Susan and offered the overwhelmed anubis a hand... Well, not a hand. She doesn't have those.

“I may stay their execution,” Sven declared. “Or perhaps I'll merely remove their noses. I will make that judgment based on my mood should my men and I succeed.”

I let out a long whistle, “If that's what's left over from hoarding a little away from the stockpile at a time... And you say these warehouses were full?”

“To the brim,” Sven nodded.

“And the Count figured he'd help himself.”

And from behind Minte's soft voice rang, “Paid for by the Count.”

The conversation ground to a halt. Sven and I both glared at the shadow hiding Minte's face. Sven bit down hard on his teeth and I could feel the surprised expression take over my face.

“Minte?” I called out, imploring her to continue.

“Papers discovered at his manor are now in context.

Accounts. Large numbers. Drained accounts. Missives, written with an angry hand," came Minte's dry monotonous account from behind the hood.

"Sven?" I turned my head toward the commander, now imploring him to come clean.

"For months now... Duke Malco has gathered his personal knights and conducted training and maneuvers through his demesne. For a long time now, the Duke has suspected an uprising like this... But he lacked the proof to indite Count Aaron. There could be no other man in Yaleria with the motive or means to challenge the Duke's authority."

"And he sought to draw him out by proving a juicy target?"

"I would assume so. Count Aaron's objections to Malco's fervor in defending and maintaining the Brightwall has been... More..." Sven fumbled to find the proper words to maintain discretion. "Robust."

"And expensive."

I was beginning to understand Aaron's motives. If he was bank rolling the whole Duchy, and he felt those funds were being wasted chasing after ghouls and goblins that aren't there... Yet those ghosts certainly were there. And she's pining and stalking the duke... Who might take it as a pretext for her invasion... Things were now starting to add up. This whole affair is turning out to be comedy of errors. Ships passing in the night. Treachery, feelings of frustration, love sick maidens who care not for what trouble their fancies cause.

"Yaleria has never been a wealthy part of the Empire," Sven sighed. "It may have been, long ago, but it was also a decadent kingdom. Yet even before the Empire it has defended the wall. We have done so without fail for over two thousands years."

"And you haven't had to for about three hundred."

Sven averted his eyes and stared uncomfortably at the ground. I pushed on.

"And Count Aaron doesn't like seeing all his wealth wasted."

"It is not wasted!" He screamed and glared daggers at me.

All the soldiers at work stopped what they were doing and

stared at us. Dozens of oppressive stares. Minte shifted her footing in response to the commander's aggression and the men flanking him squirmed. He flung his fist around and cursed at them all and ordered them to continue on. And so I dared pushed on some more.

“I was at the ball he hosted... Pretty certain he meant it as a trap for the Duke. Had he shown up, the Count would have seized him there and held him hostage. Force him to abdicate and hand over Yaleria to him.”

“Had I not been thrown into the dungeons... the same dungeons meant for the enemies I have sworn to give my last dying breath to slaying... I might have thought you'd deserve to be cut down for that... For as much a scoundrel as he is, the man is still a nobleman of Yaleria.”

“And recently at that... In the grand scheme of things, that is. His grandfather was born a commoner. Struck it big with silver veins in the mountains bordering the Duchy. I'm not sure how he got control of it, but it made him rich and the Duchy too. And it had been handed to him as a fief because he managed it well... Yet that wasn't enough.”

“He planned on marrying the Duke's sister. Tie the families together... Before she became ill and passed away.”

Did the Count's plan to seize control of Yaleria fail there? Was he planning on taking over at all back then? There's too much missing information to know for sure. I had a better grasp of the situation and things were quickly falling into place. Yet I could not pick out a peaceful solution out of the mess. Things have been failing for years. Long before I had ever been dropped into this mess of a world. All that's left now is the fight.

“That's one problem and a mystery resolved... Would I be pushing my luck to assume you have some sort of plan on how we make good use of all this?”

I think I used the incorrect word there. 'We' caused Sven's face to contort once more with anger. He barely contained the snarl which about tore that stoic upper lip of his.

“My men and I are too few to retake the Brightkeep. It is well beyond our means... And no paltry band of mercenaries will make a difference in that. But we can disrupt the Count's mercenaries and open a path for reinforcements,” Sven grunted as he scratched the tip of the kitchen knife over three locations of his crude drawing.

The image was in the crude shape of a rectangle. That shape was then supported by two longer and more squat rectangles which I assumed were walls. A trio of separate circles had been etched into the wood at the two locations where the tower met the wall and a third about three-quarters up the main tower.

“If we can manage to secure these three locations, we stand a chance of retaking the keep, provided we hold out until reinforcements to arrive. Here and here,” he said while jabbing the knife into the two areas by the walls, “are the choke-point leading onto the Brightwall's ramparts. We'll send two small teams to make their way to these locations and secure them. Once secured, they will fight till the last to keep these gates opened. If the other stations along the Brightwall have yet to fall, the whole garrison from peak to peak can flood into the Brightkeep and secure it. Meanwhile, I will lead the larger formation into the main gatehouse. From here we shall close and bar the main inner gate. That should isolate the fortress from any of the Count Aaron's men from reinforcing their position here.”

“That's a plan relying a lot on chance.”

“While you keep your faith in heathen ways I shall have faith in the Almighty's providence. Count Aaron has no claim, nor divine right to rebel against the Duke and the man who I have sworn my loyalty to.

“While we are talking about heathen ways,” I said while turning around to look back at Ba'el.

She sat atop a box located behind Minte and I. The demon had been quiet for quite some time now. And that is certainly newsworthy in and of itself. Her legs were crossed while pointing one paw up into the air and another down below the floor. A meditative pose she had told me. But there was something about it that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Ba'el was doing her best to sense the current of magic and try to have any of those Silver Bannerman show up as a blip on her radar.

“Yeah, I can feel her alright,” she said with her eyes still closed.

I'm not sure how she knew to speak up after she had become the center of attention... Let alone sense what I was thinking and about to ask.

“There's another two small fries. Hardly worth worrying about... But this one chick is for sure is not covering her tracks. Letting all that mana spill all over the place. Sloppy. What a disgrace. You're in war zone, darling.”

I turned back toward Sven and gave him a weak attempt at a smile, “And with that, I suspect they still don't know what's in store for them.”

The look of disgust was palpable on his face.

“Regardless if the element of surprise will be ours... I am confident reinforcements will come. Assuming we manage to hold our positions. One of my men informed me that three days ago that he manged to let loose a fleet of carrier pigeons with a message of distress to the other towers along the wall. Surely, they have fortified their own positions and await orders.”

“Assuming you can signal em,” Rose said as she slid up toward the table.

Her decorum left something to be desired as she held an intact sausage, width wise, in her mouth before tearing it to shreds in seconds and swallowing it all at once. Wagging behind her happily was her tail and flickered which had returned to letting off stray embers. Sven did not appear to take it well.

Rose waltzed up beside me and her gaze waltz over the etching on the table. A spark seemed to ignite in the corner of her eye.

“Oh, splitting up into three groups when you're outnumbered? You trying to get yourselves surrounded?”

There was a merry chastisement in her voice, but its criticism toward Sven nonetheless. I was more impressed that she managed to make sense of Sven's scrawling after looking at it for a couple seconds. If only she didn't focus all that energy on one thing, we'd have fewer problems with her common sense. Sven, however, didn't appreciate Rose's quick assessment. He couldn't brush it off as critique. His pride wouldn't allow it and his loathing of the inhuman demanded him to lash back.

“We're in no condition to fight a forward battle,” Sven seethed. “A battle of attrition is in their favor unless we get rid of their reinforcements and lock ourselves in here with them.”

Rose took a second look around the room at all Sven's men.

“Hmm, guess that's the best you can hope for with this lot as they are.”

Oh boy. She could have put that better. And Sven looked ready to explode with anger, but I felt something off directly behind me. My sudden spinning about to check on Minte caught the Knight Commander's attention. I sensed something off and discovered that Minte had actually turned her head off to the side. Her antenna had also become animated and were writhing about.

“Minte?” I whispered.

She raised a finger to her lips to hush me as she turned moved her head as if trying to triangulate on something distant and unseen. No more than twenty seconds passed silently until her antenna stopped moving and she decided to speak.

“Out of time,” she softly replied.

A pair of Sven's soldiers burst into the warehouse and each of them were visibly frazzled and bloodied. But that wasn't their blood on them.

“Commander Sven!” One of them shrieked. “We ambushed a patrol.”

That's all the first one could say before having to catch his breath. That's when the other one continued the report.

“On the level above us. Eight of them.”

“Changing of the guard,” Minte said softly. “They'll be on alert when the relieved fail to return.”

She's right. And if there's an expert on enemy patrols, it'd be the one who's an expert in infiltration.

“Men!” Sven yelled and caused the room itself to rumble. “Form ranks and prepare to storm the upper levels. Report to your commanding sub-officer and await the order to move out.” He turned to the four men flanking him. “Larsson and Hogh, gather twelve men each. You two will be storming the west and east gatehouses. Sachs, you'll remain here with six fighting men and guard the wounded. Barricade yourselves and resist should we not distract all their forces.

Busemann, you are with me and will serve as second in command. We shall take the remainder of the men and secure the Brightkeep's main gatehouse—" Sven turned again and called out, "Godek!"

Those three men dashed off to assemble the men another emerged from the throng of bodies which were now moving about the room like water. Fluid, chaotic, but all of it toward one downstream goal.

"Yes sir! We have prepared the signal. One is the best we could manage. Everything has been plundered, but we happened to rig this one together."

Sven took the cylinder tube and stashed it away in his inside jacket pocket. It looked like a roman candle, if I had to hazard a guess. It had the appearance of a roman candle, so I figured it must be some type of flare. Fire that up into the sky and the guard towers along the wall might take notice. That's what Sven appeared to be relying on.

"Come now, men of the Brightwatch! Now is not the time for men of words. Now is the time for men of action!"

It sounded as if it was directed at me. But as I let that insult strew Rose wrapped a claw around my shoulder and jumped for joy. A beaming smile had been plastered on her face as her eyes looked forward into the battle there would soon be.

"A battle against insurmountable odds. Almost a dozen to one. Out armed, out armored!"

Those were things that usually left someone in despair. However, the tracks underneath Rose's train of thought were twisted and completely alien to anyone sane.

"Stay out of our way!" Sven commanded. "This is our responsibility. You will not be paid or your services recognized. I'll look the other way for releasing my men, but you deal with those Bannerman as you see fit and leave the Counts men to me."

Unwilling to bend a knee or compromise his pride, the command snarled while he stormed away and threw out orders lightning fast to the knights scurrying around him. Rose's expression did not change at all. I don't think she even heard him.

"Should this all come to its worst possible conclusion—" I heard Susan say, "we shall take that as an invitation to abandon the

field.”

She had a resigned expression on her face. It could also be exhaustion. Healing as many wounds and stabilizing many others must have been taxing on her.

“Abandon the field?” Ba'el quipped as she leaped off her perch. “When we're this close to the Yalerian node? I think you greatly underestimate their chances.”

“If they refuse our assistance from here on, then we cannot be at fault for any failure on their part.”

“Oh, I'll agree with you for once there. But we're getting Laven-boy here to that throne room,” Ba'el said, slapping my backside.

Then she grabbed hold of my sleeve and suddenly pulled me off balance. I nearly fell flat on my face, but stopped myself with my head bowed and looking right down the Demon's face. Her expression was uncharacteristically serious for once.

“You do that for me and I'll rock your god damned world,” she said with a droll voice.

Ba'el's paws locked onto the sides of my head and rooted me in place with her vice-like grip. She stared up at me long and hard at me with those deep green eyes and unusual pupils. I kept waiting for her to spring the punchline. This always ends as some kind of prank. But no. She appeared be pleading. Dare I say, begging?

The puppy dog eyes treatment didn't last long though. A hook from stage left took a firm grasp of her twin-tailed hair and yanked her back. A mouse-like squeak escaped her lips and her face scrunched in surprise. Minte was the one responsible. Ba'el appeared as flabbergasted as I was. The assassin wore a very subtle, yet cross, expression. Once Ba'el realized it wasn't Susan bullying her, as usual, the tirade of profanities came flowing out.

“If Sven is a friend of the good Sir Rissler, then I for one cannot abandon the old friend of an ally!” Chris bellowed and drowned out the vile string of curses coming out of the demon behind me. “Oaths broken, sacred sights defile. Thievery. Banditry. A whole mess of honorless curs. I could nary stomach the thought of letting JUSTICE'S name be tarnished!”

After rattling off several orders, the commander himself

stomped his way back toward our group. His thrust a finger in my face and rattled off another.

“We're heading out now. And you, Laven, will be sticking with me.”

“...Come again?” I replied after a couple dumbfounded blinks.

“Consider it insurance,” Sven menaced. “If you and your lot think you can use us as mere distractions, you are terribly mistaken.”

“Way to go, your holiness~” Ba'el said, sardonically, all while still having her hair tugged at by Minte.

“These are not acceptable terms!” Susan protested.

“If you want access to the old Throne Room, you'll have to go through me first. And its either the privilege I bestow, or over my dead body. Take care of those Silver Bannerman, and I'll consider the situation stable enough to grant it sooner.”

“Aha~ Scared of a few adventurers, huh? Can't blame ya,” Rose smirked, rubbing her chin and nursing the smug expression on her face.

A passing soldier handed a hand-axe over to Sven, and he almost looked ready to use it, but relented and swallowed his anger. He also didn't give Rose an answer. The commander turned red, fumed and turned around without a word and stormed off. Rose hit him right on the nose with that one. If it were not for the Silver Bannerman, the man wouldn't be tolerating our presence at all. He was terrified of them, yet would not speak about them.

Perhaps it was with those adventurers that this keep fell so easily to begin with. And that worry quickly became contagious. I had seen them with my own eyes before and we had survived them... That's because we ran away from them. They were magically enhanced and pruned till only the elite remain in their ranks. Their rank and file were not much more than the standard mercenary, but their lieutenants were monsters all their own. I peered into the eyes of their leader at the ball and that's the feeling the discharge of his seething aura.

Not that it fazed Rose one bit. Sven's orders were to stay out of his fight, but such words were nonsense to her. They glanced off the

girl;s thick skull like water on a duck's back... Or by it vaporizing instantaneously on that tail of hers. No one else seemed particularly worried about Sven's mental state besides Susan. Her eyes narrowed as she peered deep into the man's soul.

She spoke quietly, but not directly to me to avoid suspicion, “He is a man to whom words of good men are as gold... But he chases ghosts.”

“Past, present or future?” I asked, half joking.

“That the title he bears has been bestowed onto heroes of the past. He feels unworthy and puts himself and others at risk to climb out from their shadows.”

“Another captain Ahab it is then. Great. At the very least he doesn't want to kill us?”

“He may be foolishly brave, but not moronic.” she replied with a sigh.

“Good enough for me. We're off to a better start than we usual.”

I stepped out in front and the girls all turned their attention toward me.

“Whether Sven likes it or not, he's going to need us to help him break through and secure that gatehouse. Once we do that, we'll be free to push to the Throne Room.” I took out the void crystal which quivered with the absence of power in my hand and continued, “The princess says that this can turn the tide of the battle... And it seems Ba'el agrees. We uncork this node on the ley line, and we're in a position to turn the tables on the Count.”

“I could stand to get a little more reckless if there were that amount of mana fluttering about,” Ba'el nodded. “I'm eating into my own life force if I push it... Add to that the naked wizard and the floozy princess... Consider you, Laven, getting your job done would unshackle those broads.”

Figures she'd reserve getting fired up when it's something in her best interests. And then the clarion call to war was sounded. A low and low note on an ornate horn quivered the insides as the sound bounced off the walls of the warehouse. Sven's arms moved like a maestro conducting a sympathy. His arm signals gathering the ranks

of the men together. Three separate groups, now armed and ready for combat, gathered and began their march. The two smaller groups formed the two prongs of the vanguard which would break off on their own a few levels up. The girls and I took our place near the rear of the third column, within arms reach of Sven himself.

We would be quite a few ranks and file behind the spearhead where the action would take place. Sven wasn't taking command at the front either. One of the lieutenants from before took that position. I had to wonder for a moment if it were cowardice, but Rose whispered to me, a spear needs a study heft as much as it needs a sharp point. That was strangely poignant for her, but she does manage to surprise when the situation calls for it. At least when the situation heads south and when the fighting starts.

Through winding stairwells wide enough for three men shoulder to shoulder, Sven and his men lunged up the ancient steps. With nothing but prisoners' clothes on their backs and iron gripped soundly in their hands. They would have to strike hard and fast and use the element of surprise. Rose told me as we marched, with no lack of excitement, that we'd likely enjoy one ambush and a brief moment of chaos. Everyone's eyes were on the battlements and staring far off to the horizon where the duke's castle grew out from the hills and were surrounded by marsh and old growth forest. They would soon have their attention rudely torn away and forced inward.

The convoy pressed on one floor after another. We bypassed seven levels and I began to wonder when I'd get a chance to see the outside world again. It had been nearly a week since I last saw the sky. I'd settle for the darkness of night with those creepy twin moons and alien stars. This fortress offered no favors. Built as solid as the mountains themselves and just as uncompromising. Not a single arrow slit could be found.

And it's on that thought that a pulse of discord washed over the column. Something had shocked the front and the message passed down the line.

“Enemy contact!” the signal runner screeched.

Sven pushed the men in front of him aside as he charged forward commanding the men to push onward.

“Wall groups, break off! We'll run the diversion now!”

“We got further than I thought,” Rose mused and then

chased after Sven.

I had no other choice but to follow her and the girls formed rank behind me. Two dozen men broke rank and filtered out of the stairwell and vanished into the keep's labyrinth. They left without fanfare and left behind nothing more than hope. We could only pray they manage to slither their way through the gaps and seize the gates leading to the walls. Those are the sole avenues which would send us reinforcements.

It wasn't long before the smell of iron began to mingle with the scent of raw fire from Rose's tail. The sound of battle did not take long after, but had to contend with the thump of my heart and hoarseness of breath as I ran. To keep up with Rose took everything I had since I also had to worm my way through the asteroid field of soldiers also trying to make their way to the fight.

On the heels of Sven and Rose we came to a doorway at the end of a long hall. I peaked inside and gleaned that we had stumbled into a mess hall of sorts. The sound of clashing steel, splintering wood and the shouts of men rang from within. A scene of the count's mercenaries peacefully assembled and eating their meals being rudely interrupted by a band of furious, armed and half-naked knights played out in my mind. This melee had been going on for about a minute now and showed no signs of abating. Flipped tables and a makeshift defense held steadfast as the mercenaries relied on instinct to survive.

“Put your spines into it!” Sven bellowed as he leaped in to join the fray.

Rose was hot on his heels, but got set on her heels after he pushed her away by the shoulder. He glared back at her and with his eyes threatened her to stay put. Not when the situation had descended into the thick of battle did he relent and submit to our help. I grabbed Rose by the wrist to anchor her in place and offer some semblance of comfort. She responded by pouting, but playing it cute wouldn't convince anymore. Sven had already rushed into the fray.

“Not yet,” I whispered into Rose's ear-fin.

Her eyes locked forward onto the battle while mine looked back over my shoulder as the other girls finally arrived.

“This is bad,” Chris said, the tone in her voice higher then usual.

If she was speaking normally... That's more than enough to convince me things were not under control. As strange as she is, the mask does come off when it needs to. My mind drifted onto thoughts of the Count's men managing to send off a couple of runners to raise the alarm across the entire Brightkeep... Our first order of business would be dealing with that.

“Minte,” I called out and watched her stand to attention. “Do what you do best.”

I pointed beyond the mess hall and motioned my hand in the general vicinity of an escape route from it. We exchanged glances and she nodded in confirmation. No words were needed to convey intent.

“Stay safe."

A faint smile peeled back the corners of her lips and her white skin became a light hue of pink around the cheeks. And as sudden and fleeting was that smile had been, so too was her presence. A flicker of her form left behind nothing more than an after-image. She vanished from sight in the brief moment a single knight rushed past in front of us.

“Where has Rose gotten to?” I heard Susan say.

The answer to the question should be painfully obvious, but since she had to ask, it filled me with dread. I swung my pointing hand back to where Rose and her wrist should have been and the girl had already vanished.

“Monster!” came the panicked cries from within.

I pushed my own way into the room immediately after and I watched Rose in the last few strides of her charge. Her laughter is loud, clear and mirthful. She drew the sword from her back and bent her sword arm back like the string of a bow. The cry of monster was less a warning to the other and more like a call of: red rover, red rover, send Rose over. And the scarlet missile charged in, veering off slightly from a full head-on collision. It was a heat seeking missile, directed at what she no doubt presumed as the weak point in the line.

Rose used a wooden table as a boost to leap up into the air and bring her sword down while laughing at the top of her lungs. The steel crashed down on a raised shield. Her body slipped through a bramble of sword and spear points. They glanced off the scraps of leather she not call a swimsuit considered armor. They ricocheted off

her boney red scales and she paid no mind when they nicked her skin. She ignored all pain and danger as she brought down, single-handed, her sword and splintered the round wooden shield in two. The tip of her sword bit into the mercenary's shoulder and he howled in pain and was sent to the ground.

Upon landing, she grabbed a thrust spear by the haft. She couched it under her arm pit and locked it secured against her waist. She spun and pulled the man behind the pike and dragged him off balance. As the man's teeth met the ground, the wood snapped and she used the broken off tip, and it's short length, to stab and leave it in another close enough to try tackling her.

She broke through the line, but before she could be surrounded, the knights of the Brightwall poured in behind her. The shield wall, the line of defense, was shattered. A scrum had now descended into a true melee. Enemies and allies no matter where you looked. In front, behind and all around. Men who had finished tying their bowstrings no longer had a block of unarmored men to fire down upon. They scanned the room and had to hesitate before letting their bowstring twang.

Chris squeezed into the room behind me. Her entry was greeted with renewed cries of monster. Panic and confusion were renewed. These men were not paid to be fighting this kind of threat. I couldn't spy a single brooch or fluttering banner of silver. The wyvern provided an enticing target since she stood a head higher then the roiling mass of fighting men. But those arrowheads were not made of stuff sturdy enough to puncture those scales and pale skin backed by something like them underneath. She kicked off the ground and sent a gust of wind which unbalanced those fighting around her; some even fell to the ground.

A iron wrought chandelier hanging high up in the room groaned as its chains embedded into the ceiling creaked under her weight. Chris clung to it with her talons and took a deep breath. A jet of liquid fire washed over the balconies of the mess hall where the missile slingers had taken position. Many were to late to take cover by the time they realized what was in store. They were too busy leaving minor cuts and bruises on Chris with their basic iron tipped arrows, rather than fall back. The napalm-like substance engulfed the first couple and the others threw themselves to the ground and rolled about in pain with patches of fire growing all over their bodies. The first couple were luckier, they simply crumpled on the spot and stopped moving.

They could no longer hold their ground after the onslaught of flame, both living and not. The mercenaries tried to flee, but turning their backs in the cramped quarters lead to them being quickly brought down. Chris dropped down from the ceiling and slammed her wings into two below her, rending them unmoving on the floor. Rose slammed her pommel into the skullcap of another and the dented steel thud viciously into the skull and sent him tumbling into a broken wood table.

“Don't let them get far!” Sven roared. “Everyone else, form up. Those of you that can still walk, follow me!”

The meaning behind those words hit me soon enough. Two to three dozen bodies were scattered about the room. Most of them were motionless and bleeding out onto the floor. Arrows and crossbow bolts sticking out from them, open wounds and wrenched limbs twisting the bodies of others. A fair number of them, but far from most, were the rag wearing prisoners themselves. A few could be helped back onto their feet, but the others remained motionless. One young man in particular, our eyes crossed paths. He wore the dregs of prison clothes and sat upright against the wall. He held his stomach as the patch of red soaked the dusty beige cloth and stained the floor. Our eyes parted as his head slowly rolled down and his eyes half shut. He kept breathing in vain.

Battles with magic children, thundering footsteps of fantastical living suits of armor, high speed chases and fairy tale clashes seemed rather distant now. This bloody brawl had all the hallmarks of real conflict. A cold dose of reality which chilled my blood. Yet everyone carried on. Those that could not walk were left behind and enemies who appeared they could, were finished off without mercy.

“Sir... You'll need to look at this,” I heard one of Sven's lieutenants say.

A few meters behind me was the man himself, bloody and covered in fresh cuts and minor wounds. He paid them no mind as he followed his subordinate outside the room and into another adjacent hallway. I followed closely behind and saw what may have been the source of the lieutenant's concern. To me it's a miracle, a ray of light from a small window. A reddish hue of either dawn or dusk. A few motes of dust dancing gaily in the sun beam.

“Dammit. Why today of all times?” Sven growled.

He turned and noticed I was present. His eyes diverted for a moment in thought, but quickly swung back around. He reached to his belt and untied the firework from its loop. Without a word he thrust it into my chest.

“What?” I said, too taken aback to muster any more meaningful response.

“Fog. We've got fog blowing in from the Ufilreen swamps up-wind. If we fire this thing off here, the gatehouses along the wall will never see it. We need to launch it from up higher.”

“Okay...” I said dubiously, still not following.

“Get your ass to the Old Throne. Now. I have to lead the men to the gatehouse and hold the line there. Get above the fog bank and send out that signal. I honestly don't care whatever it is you plan to do up there, but the ass of every one of my men relies on getting this signal off! We already lost good deal — too many good men— getting this far.”

“You're gonna lose a lot more of those men soon if you'll don't move it,” I heard Ba'el's voice chime in from behind.

It appears she had followed me and I hadn't noticed.

“That wizard had a big spike in emotion and then went silent. I can vaguely pick out her aura and its on the warpath now,” she said with a shrug.

Sven could hear her, but didn't ask any questions or react in the demon's general direction. Dozens of options and plans of attack were competing against one another, I could see that conflict in his eyes.

“Ba'el... “ I called out the demon's name, but failed to go further as my conviction faltered.

“Yeah yeah yeah,” she rambled and brushed me aside. “I'll take care of that. You do your business and get that flare back to its proper home. I'll stick with seven layers of inferiority complex here and keep that gatehouse secure.”

“Take Chris with you,” Rose said as she came around the corner.

She was joined with Susan and Chris, the latter thumping her wing talon against her chest.

“I shall be the bulwark!” she declared proudly.

“Suzie and I will get Laven to this throne room place. The three of us can slip through more easily and her little light doohicky can get us to— ”

“Do not call me—“ Susan barked, but cut herself off quickly. “And it is not a doohicky!.. Tis the Celestial Guide of—”

Before she could correct Rose, the commander butted in and gave his last orders.

“Do as you wish! We've let the situation has deteriorated enough as is. We move. NOW!”

Chris patted me on the shoulder and wished me luck and Ba'el gave me a sly wink before the two of them set off along with Sven. That left Rose, Susan and I alone and isolated in the Keep. There was no time for words, the doohicky manifested itself from the priestess' golden staff and quickly sprung to life.

Susan offered a prayer, “To the high seat of this castle. Please, wise light of the Sun God, lead the way.”

Dancing about in the air for a few seconds, the light shot off down the hall, around the corner, and then returned. It ebbed back and forth as if to beckon us and so we followed. Through the twisting corridors this pattern repeated itself. At times Rose and Susan's ears would twitch and we'd take refuge as a gang of mercenaries screaming and shouting orders would run past another corridor further down.

We sneaked our way up one level and then the next. Dashing between cover to cover. Stepping silently up toward the crown of the Brightkeep itself. We saw only mercenaries and not a single Bannerman. I know Ba'el had mentioned she could sense one of their leaders, but Sven and his men must have done their work in drawing the whole ire of the garrison towards them. Yet I could do nothing more than put blind faith in their ability to reach the gatehouse and lock this whole structure down.

Two of three objectives done, at the very least.

The hallway was quite wide here; an artery compared to all the

winding capillaries we had been sneaking through. We came around a corner and discovered a slew of bodies on the ground. They wore prisoner's rags, but not all of them were easily recognizable. Limbs were detached, but there wasn't a drop of blood to be seen. I had to look twice, and sometimes thrice, to make sure they were not merely discarded mannequins. Even their weapons were cleaved into pieces, the solid lumps of iron and sturdy wood that they were.

I felt compelled to inspect them further. If only to see for certain that my eyes were not playing tricks on me... But Rose grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me back. She took the lead and swiveled her head like a radar dish before homing in on a pillar far in the distance.

“He hasn't left,” Rose said menacingly.

Steel tipped jack boots on stone. That is what echoed from the far side, the lone man walked out from behind the pillar. A skirt of lamellar armor encased his legs and hips, but besides the wife beater of a white top, kept his chest bare. A tachi hung horizontally against his hip. His lamellar gauntlet never let of the hilt's tip. Despite the eastern looking origins of the sword, his face bore no foreign appearance to it. Regardless, he wore his raven black hair in a long top knot. A pair of sickly albino red eyes glared out from beneath his brow when he turned to face us and began to walk toward us like the body ridden carpet were his personal catwalk.

“Not enough,” he mumbled. “Their hearts beat with determination... So full of life and brimming with purpose. But it's not enough to sate it.”

That's when I saw it, now that he was close enough. A single thin chain necklace with an amulet at its center. So simple and plain. Yet it held a lot of meaning to it. It's a wavy panel, a small cast metal shape of a flag fluttering in the wind. Made of pure radiant silver.

“Now now now,” he said now with a creepy smile on his face. “Now here is some blood. Full of life, but also of fire. How exquisite and quaint.”

Rose drew the sword out from the sheath on her back and took a defensive stance.

“Laven. Hannah. Go,” she said with her eyes fixed forward.

The tone in her voice and the expression on her face were serious. Deadly serious.

“Go. He wont do anything.”

Shoshanah didn't even flinch or protest at being called that one. And she always finds the heart to do that. But now is certainly not the time. Both of us could feel it. Her tanned skin turned a lighter shade and almost white when she looked upon the man. Her face contorted with both confusion and disgust. I had never seen an expression on her face like that, not even when Ba'el was acting at her worst. And she didn't need to explain it to me. I could feel the same down to my bones.

This man was demented. A truly disturbed man.

We were hesitant to move, but we picked the right side of the all and moved forward at Rose's behest. The man's eyes did not pull away from Rose for an instant. He came to a stop about 10 meters away from Rose and remained motionless after that. A couple bangs of hair hanging down in front of his cheeks were the only thing that danced in the drafty hall. Susan and I took that opportunity to leave that chilled earth at once. Our mission drove us on, but I could not stop myself from looking over my shoulder one last time before we turned another corner and left the hall.

“Dammit,” I cursed through clenched teeth.

“Move forward, Laven. If we are to have any hope of victory here today, we shall accomplish our goal... Lives here depend on it. The future of this realm depends on it... A mystery you must solve lays beyond it.”

The void crystal. It will unlock something I must see. That's the carrot Hyria held in front of me. Despite everything that happens here, some ancient secret lays hidden here. One similar to the etching of the temple far to the south, beyond the equator and thousands of kilometers away. Something tied to these ley lines and their nodes.

But those were mysteries that appeared to have a life all their own. And they did not want to be easily discovered, if revealed at all. As Susan and I came around another corner, we came within thirty meters of another group. Less menacing then the man himself, but two out of nine wore the same chain necklaces as the deranged swordsman. Their senses were more attune than the others as well. Their heads swiveled toward Susan and I immediately. They had gathered silently, professionally, and waited patiently. The first sound either of us heard was the drawing of the weapons from their sheaths.

“Run!” Susan yelled.

One of them notched an arrow to her bow and let a missile fly. Susan waved her staff and created a brief flash of gold light. A kinetic blast timed to knock the arrowhead away.

“Monster!” The other bannerman yelled. “You three, get reinforcements. Go!”

Three of the mercenaries nodded and had no complaints taking orders from the man. The other adventurer woman readied another arrow while Susan and I bolted across the hallway into another narrow capillary.

We'd have a bunch of them hot on our heels soon. The glowing light became more animated and panicked as it quickly zipped down one hallway and then back again to search down another. Our path become increasingly winding as we evaded our pursuers and had to avoid checkpoints and further ambushes. We climbed higher and higher till the guiding light returned more excited than before. It chimed happily and zipped off in a straight line. It fizzled off right into a wall and did not return. Susan and I followed its path down the proper corridors and came to one last hallway. It was like the other artery from a number of floors down, but this time had a very official and ornate decoration.

“That might just be fancy enough to be the place,” I sighed.

Clang

Susan slammed her staff into the ground and let it free from her grip. It stood rigid and unmoving.

“Susan?”

“Shh,” she hushed me rather rudely.

And only so that she could concentrate. A brilliant light filled the room from the staff at the strange ritualistic words spoken in a whole other language from Susan's lips. I watched as the light collected into brilliant orbs and flew off in all directions. They gathered at the doorway we came from and turned into a wall of solid stone. They flew off in all directions and formed wall after wall. They were for a time see-through, but gradually turned opaque. Shimmering illusions. Mirages.

“This shall fool them for a time. Should they discover they are false and in reality barriers, I will hold them for as long as I am able. In that meantime, do what you must do.”

“We've split the party more than enough,” I protested.

“Fire the signal. Return the crystal, Laven. Too many have perished and too many have yet to bleed. But they need not. If only you have the courage to step forward... I can offer nothing more than this... And one other thing.”

“And that would—“

Quick and sudden. Unexpected, but not unwelcome. Susan hesitated for a second, but grabbed my hands in her paws. She pulled them down so they could not defend myself. Her lips pressed up against mine as she stood on the tips of her claws. A soft and brief peck of her soft lips on mine. She pulled away and sighed through her nose and smiled.

“Good luck.”

And a dirty trick. One last flash of light blinded me as it sprung up in the short distance between Susan and I. I rubbed the pain from my eyes and saw that dull gray stone had replaced the space where she had been a moment ago. I reached out and touched the illusion. It looked real, but did not feel like stone at all. It felt like glass instead and had no smell. I took a step back and took in my new surroundings. A claustrophobic array of walls hemmed me in with the tall ornate doors crowning one last set of stairs. A red velvet carpet welcomed me.

I could not refuse its invitation and ascended. The wooden doors were surprisingly warm to the touch and receptive to force. One might expect to lock such a place up, but they opened without issue. A long and groaning creak of settling oak reverberated off the stone keep and ushered me into a room flushed with light.

That red through the slit far below had turned to many brilliant shades. Day had come to Yaleria and the skylights far above. White light from the midday sun and many spots on the floor were littered with rainbow patterns. Stained glass murals coated across the ground and depicted heroes, saints, monsters defeated and a proud history of this nation. A balcony circled the walls below the dome which made up the ceiling. A pair of twin staircases at the far side of the room spiraled

up toward the heavens to meet them.

Scattered about the room was a museum. Armored mannequins waited motionless and on eternal guard duty. Displays of jewels and chests filled with documents and other finery were gathered about. Marble statues from long gone eras and half a library in tall shelves loaded with literal tons upon tons of dusty old tombs waited, unread for who knows how long. It definitely looked like a treasure store. Yet it still had the elevated plateau above the main floor where the throne itself waited. A seat for a king. For a kingdom that existed long ago. A throne which had not served its true purpose for— There is someone sitting on it already.

A man covered in scars. At least, what wasn't covered in armor. His arms a mess of scar tissue like a tribal tattoo is black. His chest encased in a shining silver breastplate. Legs encased in plates of metal and a kettle helm resting on the arm of the throne. A bald head, scarred as badly as his arms and housing a pair of furious hate filled eyes. He had watched me the whole time I stared in wonder at the room surrounding me. Now that I noticed him, the crushing presence of his rage weighed down heavily on me.

Something twirled round and round in his left index finger. An orbiting flash of gold reflected the sunlight into my eyes with every pass. A crown. Peaks of jeweled radiant gold, fit for a king. He let it slip from his fingers without a care and let it tumbled down the steps from the throne and roll its way to my feet. I saw now that its finely crafted peaks had been dented and crushed. What was once magnificent had been callously destroyed for no good reason at all.

His bare hand now grabbed a great-axe resting against the throne and rose to his feet. He stomped his boots onto the ground and a loud click gave way beneath his feet. The doors slammed shut behind me and another click of metal sealed them shut. Metal plates in his armor clanked as lumbered down the stairs. Eyes set straight ahead.

Nerick's voice was level, stern and laconic, “The dream is over. Time to die.”

Chapter 99

“What do you mean you haven't heard from fourth garrison?” The mercenary screeched to the man striding along on his left.

“They are your men, are they not?” The man with the silver chain around his neck spat back. “If there is a problem it's your responsibility. Do what you are paid to do and fix it.”

The mercenary stopped in his tracks and a column of other mercenaries stopped with him. That alone was all they could do to finally make the other man stop after taking a few more steps on his own. He turned about slowly, and with tired and annoyed expression, levied his sunken brown eyes backward. Each blackened bag beneath his eyes added another decade to what should have been a relatively youthful face, the disgusted frown furthered the premature grumpy old man visage further.

“You can pull that fat head from your pompous ass, you git.” The mercenary screamed with fiery black eyes and pox scarred face contorted with rage. “Don't think you are so high and above it all to the point you look down and think we are all the same. You ain't so high and mighty because of who you choose to lay in bed with.”

A quick glance by anyone and they'd initially claim there is no difference in the build between the two men. They clad themselves with similarly; chain mail tunics and a few plates to protect the joints. Both were marked with familiar battle scars and carried arms that suggested they likely fought with similar styles. Yet if this person were to look closer, and notice that distinctive silver chain and fluttering flag medallion around his neck, his conviction would evaporate.

Their job descriptions were as separate as night and day. The mercenary's provocative remarks didn't ruffle the feathers of the adventurer one bit. Talismans jingled off his armor and each carried with it a minor charm. His natural strength was augmented with a hint of magic energy and the average man had no access to that level of sorcery, let alone the ability to soak it in and put it to use.

The Bannerman threw themselves into mortal combat with monsters and their careers were oft short if they could not quickly bring themselves up to a supernatural level of combat. Novices that passed their initial training and apprenticeships were inducted as acolytes. These men and women were gifted with the wards and magics of the

guild and soon passed the regular rank and file soldiers and mercenaries of the Empire. Equipping such trinkets onto whole armies was prohibitively expensive and the knowledge to their creation were fiercely protected to maintain a competitive edge. And the Silver Bannerman's effectiveness in both has lead to their meteoric rise over the past couple decades.

And with that air of superiority over his fellow man, the man turned around without a word and continued on. His high and mighty act remained impervious to other man's protests.

“Fourth Garrison were part of another company,” the mercenary said while lunging forward to buzz around the Bannerman like a mosquito. “We work together on this job, but that don't me their damn keeper.”

“Then send your own runner and find out what the matter is.”

“We did that!” the mercenary officer roared back. “And don't tell me how to do my damn job! And don't try to hide it. You have as much to lose as we do!”

“Hardly,” The bannerman snorted, stifling a laugh.

The mercenary stopped dead in his tracks with a flabbergasted expression slapped across his face.

“Our job is entirely different to your own. We are not paid to tussle with other men.”

“Then why in all the hells are you even here!” the other man roared. “The Brightkeep garrison is on the loose and you don't care? It's not a matter of if they come this way. Don't act as though this doesn't concern you!”

“I doubt it. I suspect my Captain will inform us that he has completed our business here. We'll depart soon after. Dealing with your little insurrection is not in our—”

The adventurer's eyes narrowed and he turned his gaze back to where he was walking. He ignored the seething anger of the mercenary which is about to boil over, but soon both their eyes settled onto the shapes in the distance. A vague human shape crouched in the distance at an intersection in the tower's labyrinthine maze. The adventurer broke out into a sprint, but keep his weapon stowed away

in its sheath. Unsettled by the sudden flurry of activity from the disinterested, stubborn and arrogant man, the mercenary and all his men trundled afterward a mere second of hesitation.

Two shapes took on their proper form as the distance closed. One man crumpled on the floor and the another lithe figure of a woman knelt down to inspect him. The bright red gown caught the eye as it contrasted with the pitch blackness of her hair and pearl whiteness of her skin. Her ear twitched as the sound of clanking metal boots echoed down the hall toward her. She rose to her full height, which wasn't much, and faced the approaching men. A pair of thin slit jade colored eyes, highlighted by long feminine eyelashes, cautiously monitored their approach.

She had the appearance of someone from the furthest east. A young and beautiful woman from beyond the roiling eastern seas, the coastal marches of a separate great landmass, across its barren steppes and nestled in the infinite temperate valleys of its opposite coast. Long ago it was home to another great kingdom whose true name has since passed into obscurity and folk lore of its exiled people. Few kept its traditions alive as overtly and fewer still carried such pure blood after a thousand years.

Her red qípáo clung tightly to her curves, or thereof such on her chest. Two long slits in the sides revealed a great deal of the skin of her thighs and prevented the gown from restricting her movement. Her raven black hair tied in a bun on the back of her head. Around the knot is a long white silk ribbon that snaked into twin mountain paths that nearly reached the floor.

“Lieutenant Fan,” the adventurer addressed the woman as he came to a halt and saluted.

“...Baldwin,” the girl's indifferent voice replied.

And without caring to address his proper rank in kind..

The mercenary watched with utmost confusion. This woman before him hardly came up to either man's chest, yet he could feel a great deal of tension radiating off the other man. He could describe it by no words other than fear, and respect.

Her bored eyes slowly rolled over onto the mercenary, “Lieutenant Yù Fan of Nerick's Redeemers: Knights of the Silver Bannerman,” the woman introduced herself in full.

The man's back went rigid on instinct, but he did not get the chance to respond and introduce himself. Her tired voice asked the all important question.

“This man is one of yours, is he not?”

The mercenary officer maneuvered into a better position so he could see the fallen man's face. He recognized the man immediately. His body moved on its own to lunge forward and see for himself if he was alive. The Bannerman lieutenant threw her arm out in front of him to bar his way.

“Leave him be. He is alive and merely unconscious... And it would be better he remains that way. The longer the better.”

The mercenary followed Yù's gaze down to the lower half of the fallen man's crumpled body. Both his knees were dislocated and bent at a distressing angle. Far beyond their natural state. Mere glances were enough for anyone to shiver due to sympathetic pain.

“Why not kill him?” The other Bannerman asked.

A simple question, but one that provoked a lot of thought in the heads of all present. The question wasn't one anyone close to the man would bring up. There's a sense of relief that he hadn't been killed, so why sour it by asking in the first place? But knocking someone out on the battlefield and then render them immobile took a great deal more effort and time than merely slitting a throat. Choosing the latter had a better track record of success as well. That was the question Yù had been contemplating before the men arrived.

“So you do recognize this man then?” Yù asked the mercenary once again.

“That's right... I sent the lad out as a signal runner,” he said while throwing an accusatory glance back at the other adventurer.

“Then it's as I suspected. We have an infiltrator running amok in the Keep. They're choosing their targets carefully. Maximizing the supply line of information and trying to keep as much of the Keep in the dark as possible. I've come across three others like this over the past fifteen minutes.”

“Three? Four in total,” the mercenary balked.

“I hope they don't have to pay extra for you to count,” the

other Bannerman said, full of snark.

That almost started a fight, but the woman put her foot down and stood between the men. She hushed them with a single shush with closed eyes. Everyone became silent immediately and watched as the girl's ears twitched and her eyebrows furrow.

“They're still here... She is still here. I can sense her now,” Yù whispered.

But who? That's the question that was on the tip of everyone's tongue, but no one dared break her command of silence to ask it.

“Baldwin, extract this man and take these men away from here.

“Hold on one minute— ” The Mercenary officer attempted to interrupt.

“You,” She said and jabbed her finger into the space in front of the man's face. “Inform others not to approach this place as you take another route to your intended post.”

This time the man did not get a chance to say anything, because the petite eastern girl turned his back to him and strode another ten meters down the hall before coming to a stop. She slid her feet across the stone and took up a defensive martial art's stance.

“Come out of hiding, coward!” Yù shouted into the darkness.

No one answered. All the men present were readying their weapons. Yet more than a dozen alert eyes and ears could not sense a thing. The only man who remained calm and unconfused was the other Bannerman who watched the back o the girl with a stern eye and deep heavy breaths. The mercenary officer's eyes darted back and forth and he craned his neck in every direction, but didn't spy a thing. Everyone, but the two Bannermen, slowly dropped their guard. Just as the officer' eyes passed over what had been empty space, they returned to find another short silhouette standing another ten meters further down than Yù.

To their eyes, the cloaked figure appeared out of thin air. A symphony of steel clattering out of their sheaths filled the hallway.

“I said get back!” Yù ordered.

“Yù...” Baldwin said while breathing through his teeth.

“Yes. Exactly what you think it is,” she replied coldly.

He nodded and released his hand from the hilt of his sword and let the sword's sheath drop back down against his thigh.

“We're getting out of here,” Baldwin said while backing away and grabbing hold of the mercenary's shoulder.

The other man spun around and would have fallen flat onto the ground had he not manged to catch his balance.

“Can at least on of you tell us what is—”

“This is a fight beyond any of you. Leave now, or be killed,” Yù said, her voice instilling an icy chill in all those present.

One by one, the men took step after step backward before turning and storming off back down the hall. The newcomer's head tilted under the hood of her cloak as her veiled eyes watched them depart.

“An interesting breathing technique,” Yù said and drew the attention of the hooded figure back toward her. “Or should I say an interesting lack of breathing? It's not a spirit holding technique... Could it be... Yes. Of course. Breathing through your skin... How fitting. Something so disgusting and unnatural would be fitting your kind. You monster.”

The figure's fists clenched and the muscles in her legs tensed, but those subtle signals did not go undetected by Yù. She swung her arms around and morphed her defensive pose. To an untrained eye, it seemed frivolous, but the other figure froze in place and watched intently.

“I can't let you pass. And I can't let you run. Not that you would get away. Not now.”

Yù moved her arms once more, the fingers on her hands twisted into strange contortions. They left behind ethereal blue afterimages. An aura of ki radiating off her person. Her jade eyes glared forward and saw a thin purple shimmer surrounding the cloaked figure. She now had her target's aura identified and would follow any trail of ki left behind. An uncommon technique mastered only by those with an aptitude and mental clarity. A last resort because she could not

track the stranger by her vitals. Her breathing was too shallow or non-existent and the thumping of her heart was far too quiet to be natural.

A fluttering of cloth shattered the silence as the other girl pulled the cloaking draped over her shoulders and let it drift away on a short lived current of wind disturbed by the bewildering speed of her arms. The human silhouette gave way to something slightly more inhuman. Minte, The Green Reaper stared down her opponent with indigo eyes. Two other pairs of yellow insectoid eyes picked up hundreds of images that watched Yù from a hundred different slight differences in angle.

The eastern marital artist frowned at the sight of the two long blades attached to her wrists and resting against her forearms. Her hands clenched tighter when they snapped forward into place. Minte did not budge an inch otherwise. A pair of antenna twisting and twitching above her head and nothing else. The two of them stared each other down for a few moments longer. They studied one another intently and planned their next series of moves far in advance. When they did move, it was together and toward one another at lightning speed.

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A ring of gold fashioned into a crown spun round and round on the floor like a stray hubcap in its death throes. Battered, beaten and now nearly bent into a completely unrecognizable clump of raw soft metal. It preceded the man who so callously tossed away. No doubt it had at least a hundred times more history and prestige than his whole family name, but the rough contours of his scared face didn't show a single ounce of remorse. The man's eyes, nearly bulging with barely contained rage, burrowed into me.

“I hope it was a pleasant dream, but all good things end.” His raspy voice seethed.

He stopped his heavily armored body plodding down the red carpeted stairs in order to fish a pipe out from his pouch. He lit it with expert quickness and took an extraordinarily long puff and expelled a whole ash tray's worth of smoke.

I knew immediately why his voice sounded the way it did. He has to have one hell of a case of smoker's lung.

“Nightmares end too,” he said with a little twist of a smile on his lips. “But I'm gonna make yours doesn't end too quickly.”

“You don't strike me as the eloquent type,” I fired back. “Did you spend the last few hours on that throne thinking this introduction through?”

Not a word in return, but the smile slowly turned into a frown. That and the furrowing of his brow told me what I needed to know. I puffed out my chest the best that I could, but that didn't stop me from being half the man's size. We were probably the same height, yet his arms were the size of my thighs. My toes curled in my boots and my fists balled hard inside their gauntlets till they turned bone white. That was the best I could do to stop myself from shaking.

His dark brown eyes bubbled behind his neanderthal-like brow. He had many scars across his face and one of them wiped one eyebrow clear off his face. I had seen many types of eyes belonging to a lot of different men, but these were different. I had seen the psychotic eyes of a zealot hellbent on my destruction out of sense of duty. I had witnessed the indignation of a highborn looking down at me as though I were a pebble in his way on the roadside. I had weathered the bestial anger of a giant mutated man acting on twisted fraternal and paternal instincts. But this anger I was feeling now. It's cold and calculated hatred.

“...I suppose talking this out isn't an option?”

“No. I'd say not,” he said and took a few lumbering steps further down the stairs.

I slowly moved my hand over to the hilt of the side-arm currently waiting at my hip. It didn't offer me the sense of security I would have liked. Maybe it had something to do with the axehead of his had double the iron in than my sword.

“I'm not on the clock for this. This ain't business. This is personal,” were his venomous words as he dropped his full weight floor we now shared.

My steel toes scraped against the floor as I shifted my center of mass into a defensive stance. Having a little extra spring into my step might stop the initial blow from killing me outright. Being caught flat footed would certainly be my end. I could picture how easily my body could be cleaved in two if that blade hit me at full force with those muscles working behind it.

“And I am on business,” I said taking one step backward to finalize my defensive stance. “So how about we wait a minute and let

me finish up—?”

“I expected something more from the man walking hand in hand with the Thorn Knight,” the man said. “Are you telling me I have to kill a sniveling coward? It would be a bitter drink to swallow, but no matter... This is medicine I've needed for a long time.”

“And you're already on a prescription by the looks of it. Didn't the apothecary tell you not to mix your meds?”

“Do you still think this is a joking matter?” he said and let his axe drop into the stone floor beside him.

I would have thought that would be bad for the edge. Rolling the edges of the blade right before a fight seemed a stupid thing to do, but it was the solid stone tiles which rolled out of the way. Or should I say they were obliterated out of the way? It slammed into the ground with an ear piercing clank. I would have sworn he had hit it with a hammer three times its size had I closed my eyes and merely listened to it. A puff of dust erupted from the fresh wound in the otherwise pristine and ancient masonry. The axehead, about the size of my face, dug half way in with no problems.

“No, I'll admit I'm just buying time,” I replied with a coy smile.

“Time is what we got a lot of,” the man said while striking a piece of flint with both hands to reignite the dried weeds in his pipe.

He took one more long lung filling puff and let a whole weather system billow out and up toward the ceiling. Its pungent and revolting smell nearly caused me to retch as my eyes felt ready to tear up. The man then pulled it out and used it as a pointer to outline the frame of the massive oaken doors behind me.

“Everiron oak. I heard it doesn't grow anymore. Not anywhere where men walk the world that is. Queer elven wizardry. You ain't knocking it down and you ain't slithering your way through it either. Not unless...”

He produced a delicate and ornate key in his stubby and ugly fingers. And he just as soon snapped it in two between them. The handle fell onto the ground with a metal ping and he palmed the head. That's when he squeezed his leather gloved hand and balled it into a bundle of scrap and tossed it toward the ground in front of me. Its copper sheen made a lovely pair with the mangled gold crown.

“See? All the time in the world. Just you and I. Doesn't matter who opens that door. I'll have no regrets either way. And now I, Captain Nerick of the Silver Bannerman Redeemers, will cleanse this world of your evil.”

Nerick pulled his axe free from the ground and changed his casual intimidating gait into a menacing stride. I had my hand on the hilt of my sword, but as the man stormed closer and closer, the thought of that heavy axe bearing down caused me to rethink meeting it dead on. My gut told me to get the hell out of the way, so I opted to make a sideward roll to the right.

I hit the ground shoulder first and somersaulted forward. My feet and ass hit the floor when I failed the execution, but it was better than the alternative. I scrambled to stand back up I glanced back at Nerick who had been trapped in the inertia of swinging that tree trunk with the sharpened anvil on the end of it. True to his word, the axe hit the door and it resisted the blunt and cutting force. No normal oak should have survived.

There was the thunk that you'd hear from chopping wood behind the shed, but the door remained completely unscratched. Worse yet, Nerick seemed completely unfazed by the shock that should have washed over him. I had an almost cartoonish expectation that he'd shake like a struck tuning fork, but that certainly did not happen.

Nerick glared back at me with eyes which were now boiling with anger. Now there was also a sprinkle of disdain and a hint of impatience. I also spied a tinge of pain, but it didn't slow him down or show in the way he continued to move. His silver sheen breastplate heaved outwards and another jet of putrid smoke billowed out of the corner of his mouth.

“Are you going to stand and fight, or am I going to chase you to death, you worm?”

“You're slower than I am used to, so that just seemed the best option,” I snapped back while finally drawing my sword.

That part wasn't a bluff. I've had a number of impromptu training sessions with Rose over the past couple months. They involved running and dodging her as she flung her sword around. She moved a lot faster than Nerick and his swings were by comparison 56 kbit/s modem to fiber optic. Yet if I had to say who had more weight

behind their swing... It would have to be this pissed off gentleman by an order of magnitude.

“So it's dancing and fancy foot work, and nothing else, that you are good for? I expected more from the man who ended up at the Thorn Knight's side.”

He spat after saying that. Like you would if you were chewing on tobacco, but I'm sure it had to do with mentioning Rose. Even if were by her nom de guerre, the amount of disgust and anger in his voice when doing so struck me as rather odd. I was lacking some piece of knowledge to put this whole death match into place.

“Come on, show me what you're really made of!” Nerick screamed as he went into another charge.

This time I leaped back while thrusting my sword forward to meet the edge of his axe as it came swinging in from my left. He slapped away the tip of my iron blade with ease, but I already took two steps back. Thus, I avoided his follow through. He followed through by pulling it back and thrusting the tip forward like a spear. This time I swung across with the tip of my sword facing down and tried to push it aside. Had I not taken another leap backward it may have pierced deep into my stomach. I would have had a better time trying to push the wind away with a whistle.

And that's when I backed up into a wall. One of the room's many book shelves to be precise. It rattled back and forth a bit and a couple dusty old tomes fell to the floor further down. Nerick wasted no time bearing down on me with his axe. I would never stop it with this sword and I would not have enough time to slip away. He probably saw it coming either way, so I grit my teeth and waited for the very last moment.

His axe came down from above and I shifted my head ever so slightly to the side. I heard another loud thunk as the axe bit into the bookshelf. It made contact with the spine of a book above my left shoulder, but did not dig in any further. A rain of books came down like hail and a few bounced off the top of his head. Nerick had to use his other arm to shield himself and I used that opening to strike. He got too close to strike with my sword, so I slipped out and struck with my knee at his side. Just above his hips was the place where the front and back of his breastplate tied together and I aimed my knee there to hit his left hypochondrium. With any luck I'd crack a floating rib bruise his spleen.

There was a satisfying crack as my knee made contact, but the following whip-crack made it null. A backhanded slap across my chest landed square and true. It sent me flying off my feet and sent and I hit the ground. Hard. A half dozen or so messy rolls across the floor is what it took in order for me to come to a complete stop. The impact left me winded and I flailed and my hands slipped a few times pushing myself off the ground.

Nerick nursed the spot on his side with his hand and looked like he was in pain for a brief moment before taking another long drag on his pipe. His expression mellowed for a second before it gave way to rage. He poured all his frustration into freeing his axe from the bookshelf which pretty much disintegrated as he wrenched it loose. Loose leaves of paper fluttered about like confetti.

"Yes, that's better," he said while trembling with barely contained anger. "This is the stuff good memories are made of. You've got something, it ain't much, but it beats cutting a useless coward to pieces wouldn't be as sweet."

I coughed a few times before managing to spit out a few choice words, "What the fuck is wrong with you? Why the hell are you here and what do you want? What do you really want?"

"Revenge. It's revenge I want, Laven. Nothing more nothing less."

"You didn't know me more than a week ago! And if this ain't business, then no one paid you to kill me."

"No. I'm actually going against orders killing you. Not that it matters," Nerick said as he took a few steps closer before stopping seven meters away. "Four years ago I worked for the Haldoe Brothers. Light infantry and cavalry. Paid for reconnaissance work and paid well. The last job I took, I encountered the Thorn Knight. She buried a sword right into my chest."

He traced his hand over the front of his breast plate as his eyes became distant and his rage traveled back in time.

"Somehow, she missed my heart, and so I lived. But for months I writhed in a church's prayer housing. The pain. It wouldn't stop. My chest felt like it was on fire. It's as though it were burning from the inside out. And it wouldn't stop. Told one of my lungs had been mangled. That I wouldn't fight ever again. But I knew that wasn't all. That Thorn Knight, the salamander, the lizard with the burning tail and

the scarlet hair. I had been cursed. For a long time I thought dying would be better than laying on a bed and shivering in pain with every breath I took."

"Ha! So that's how it is," I laughed. "You call me a coward, but you are too chicken shit to take Rose on, so you come after me instead. Going for the soft target, huh?"

Nerick's back straightened out while his face contorted with anger. To his credit, the man managed to clamp down on it and keep his cool.

"No. This about doing the most harm. She didn't kill me, so it's hardly fitting I return the favor that way. No. That would be too quick. Too painless."

He took another couple steps forward into charging range and I forced myself to stand upright and hold out my sword toward him.

"This ain't my first song and dance. When I was back at that church and about ready to pack it in, the Commander himself happened to stop by. He heard what I had been through and when I told the story myself, he extended his mercy. He let me into his Bannerman and gave me purpose."

"And make sure you get your fix," I said glancing over at the pipe protruding out from the corner of his mouth."

"It makes the pain go away. A godsend from the Almighty himself. The Commander found it during his travels long ago. And when I joined him. All those months of agonizing pain were nothing but a nightmare. I saw the world. More than just The Empire. I saw lost lands. Great ruins of forgotten civilizations razed by Demon Lords of old... I've also killed men like you and their whores many times before. And their whores always act the same way. One: They shut down and lose the will to live. Taking them prisoner and watching as they refuse to eat or even drink and simply fade away. Others wander into the wilderness and are never seen again... Some rage. They rage like nothing you've ever seen before. And I'm curious what the Thorn Knight will do when I tear you in half."

I gripped my sword tighter and my arms began to shake. My eyes tried to burrow holes into the mercenary's forehead with their anger. He looked on with a twisted smile.

"You finally in the mood? Good. When I put the feelers out

about you after the Count's ball I expected you would be more entertaining than that sad display back there. And when I am through with you, for better or worse, I will have taken out three or four birds with one stone. Incubi like you— Need to be put down like the dogs you are!"

This time I would stand my ground. Nerick came bowling toward me, but I swung back trying to threaten him. He couldn't swing that cleaver on a telephone pole as freely as he wishes he could if I snuck in some thrusts and slashes of my own. If he hit me, I'd surely die, but that's if he could hit me. That axe of his carried with it some vicious momentum that could not be stopped very easily. What he could throw were certainly deadly, but each swing telegraphed itself long before he committed to letting it loose.

Granted, there wasn't much room to move out of the way. If his axe did miss, the man came right behind it. He'd need to throw his shoulder forward, tackle me and knock me off my feet. The man had to have a good twenty to twenty-five kilos on me. I weathered the blows of the axe's pole and tried to avoid direct contact and dodged the lethal arcs the axe made across the air. It briefly left an iron gray crescent as it whooshed in front of me, beside me and above me.

I had a second or two before they flew at me, but when he did swing, the blows were terribly fast. There's a lot of explosive power in those gnarled muscles. Yet attacking back put me at more risk than before. Add to that the fact he would have to hit me eventually if he swung enough as I began to tire.

The bite of steel raked across my chest and cut through the leather jerkin protecting it. It served its purpose and the tip of the axe nicked me, but went from my lower right abdomen almost to my shoulder. It split my jerkin in half and shredded the shirt underneath it. A trickle of blood followed and the stinging sensation came soon after. Nerick stopped his onslaught for a brief moment before resuming the assault.

I tried in vain to parry and slash, but every blow that landed on his thick rubbery hide left nothing but paper-cuts. The thin trails of blood didn't stop him and his face and body language didn't leave me with the impression that he felt any of those slashes. I certainly felt the next one though. It passed right in front of my face. My head jerked back, but I could feel the cold metal brush past the point just below bone and slice into the cartilage. After that, the only thing I could smell was iron. Blood poured down off my nose and out the nostrils.

It could have been worse, I could have had my face managed and my brain cleaved in half. Nerick paused altogether and retreated back a few steps to admire his handiwork. He full intended to savor everything and felt confident his victory was inevitable. His arrogance caused my blood boil.

“Getting slower already? Come on now, you need to make this more interesting,” Nerick said with a grin.

Come on Laven! Five more minutes!

Rose's voice echoed in my mind. I could picture the scene before my eyes. Rose with her playful smile flourishing her practice sword and lunging in again to continue sparring. Watched off to the side were Susan and Chris. Susan with a detached and clinical expression, but her pose and the way her tail moved gave it away that she's really worried. Chris cheered me on and encouraged me to press harder. I could see a glimpse of Minte watching from above and following my every move. A tweak of her antenna showing what her stale facial expression wouldn't, or couldn't. Ba'el lay off to the side, napping. Yet she couldn't hide the glint of her green eyes which kept watch nor the subtle fist pumps when I managed to hold my own.

Whenever Nerick opened his mouth that image fluttered and wavered. His interruptions and his constant taunting, which felt so distant now, gnawed on my patience. I wiped my arm across my face and a trail of blood painted it red. I shifted my feet into an aggressive stance and gripped my sword so tight that the steel of my gauntlets squealed.

“You don't have a monopoly on being pissed off, NERICK!” I screamed.

This time it was I who charged headlong into the mercenary. He smiled and pulled a foot back and assumed his own defensive stance. He readied his axe to block and then no doubt deliver a devastating blow. I wrapped both hands around the hilt of the one handed sword and closed the distance. However, I knew full well I wouldn't have the reach or the strength to beat that guard. I'd need to be more innovative than a straight forward charge. Not that Nerick had to know that until the last second.

I pivoted just outside of his range and jumped to the side. Row upon row of book shelves provided plenty of sturdy footholds. Nerick's shoulders twisted as his pulled back like a spring to let loose another

meaty iron arc with his axe, but he committed to a chop that ended up far too low. I pushed off with one foot and landed the other on the nearest shelf. My bent knee snapped the muscles of my thigh and kicked me ever higher. I sailed over the axe as it came swinging across.

Nerick grit his teeth and I watched as if in slow motion as he tried to throw up a last minute defense. My right foot drew back as I propelled myself forward. He watched my sword approaching out of the corner of his eyes while he glared at me and silently cursed at me. He could not reign his axe back in time, so he had to let it fly away out of his grip and sent skidding across the ground and it set off sparks at it ground to a halt. Swinging down with my sword would be too slow. That's why I snapped my right leg out and clean cocked Nerick in the side of the head as his arms tried to reach up and catch my sword. My steel toed boot connected with his jaw and his pipe popped out of his mouth and got sent flying. It struck the ground, bounced a couple time and poured its charcoal weeds across the floor as it went.

I came down where he had stood before, the man had been sent reeling and covering his face with his arms. I bounded forward and charged forward with my sword ready. I ignored the relatively unarmed arms and legs and went right for the sweet spot. My sword struck his breastplate like a mallet on a gong. Not a scratch, nor a dent, but the loud bang and ring told me the concussive force would do something. The vibrations passed down into his chest and he roared in pain.

Nerick covered and protected his chest beyond all else. The left Rose had left years ago must be incredibility sensitive. He had to take a constant prescription of pain killing narcotics to dull the pain. That's what the man had told me himself a few minutes ago. It appears he wasn't exaggerating.

I rained my sword down on his chest again and again. I treated it less like a sword and more like an axe of my own. The mightiest tree in the forest will fall if you chip away at it enough. Nerick took step after steep in retreat. But that's if the tool can last. One last swing and the sword bent beyond its limit and then snapped clean in two.

My anger outweighed my dread and I pressed closer to swing with the broken hilt, but it's one step too close. It was well within Nerick's reach and his hands struck like vipers. They wrapped themselves around my neck and their thumbs pressed in on my trachea. I grabbed onto his combined wrists with one hand while the

other slumped down at my side, sword gripped firmly.

He had eyes which were now bloodshot red. Every vessel had burst and it gave him the look of a demonic bull. My eyes were ready to bulge out of their sockets and I couldn't get so much as a gasp into my starving lungs. Now it's his turn to push me back in turn. Each passing second was one second less till my throat collapsed and my spine snapped in two.

At least I still had something sharp.

I brought the sharp point of the broken sword up and stabbed it through his left bicep. One of hands convulsed and quickly pulled away. I lost grip of it then, but it had pierced completely through his left arm. That left him with one free arm left, but he used that to toss me away instead. A barbaric roar gave him the strength he needed to send me flying backward and coming to a rolling stop several meters away.

“You little shit!” Nerick screamed

He desperately fumbled to get a grip on the sword embedded in his arm. When he finally managed to get a grip, he huffed a few hyperventilating breaths and then pulled it free. A pool of blood spilled out onto the ground below him from the wound. He tossed the bloody dagger sized blade to the side in anger. I watched as he couldn't decide which hurt more: his chest, arm or face.

Not that I had a much better position, or anything. I found myself sprawled out on the ground in a coughing fit. Every breath I took resulted in a painful resetting of the cartilage in my throat. The cartilage in my nose, which nearly split from the face, had a tiny stream of blood ran off the tip of my nose onto the floor. Another little river poured down onto my lips. Lastly, a line of blood got left on the floor wherever my chest made contact. I struggled with weakening limbs to push myself off the floor once again. A nearby table holding a priceless vase helped, but my floundering body caused it to rock, shake and sent the artifact crashing to the floor. It served as an auditory cue to Nerick that I was getting ready for action again.

The mercenary graced me with another one of his death glares. His eye twitched in pain, but we both looked at the same thing below me. I had landed nearby to Nerick's axe which remained the sole serviceable weapon within sight. He also threw a glance off to the side where his pipe had landed, but that was off to his right instead. An

addicted mind had other priorities as his furious eyes morphed into desperation as he stumbled toward it.

I dove forward and greedily grabbed the great axe's handle. Yet I couldn't pull it off the floor. Try as I might, the axe wouldn't budge.

“What the hell is this? Mjolnir?”

The thing had looked heavy, but this weight is ridiculous. I couldn't understand what it could be made of that made it so heavy. That lead to the realization that Nerick had been swinging this thing around no problem. When I glanced up after struggling in vain, the man had retrieved his precious pipe and desperately tried to relight it. I forgot to keep trying to free the axe from gravity's pull when I spied the dull red light reappear.

Nerick breathed deep and he breathed it like a gluttonous chain smoker. After a few deep puffs, he appeared to have calmed down tremendously. His shaking form became calm, but only for a moment. The bruise on his face, the arm which still bleed and the pain in his chest faded away. When the pain had left, the vacuum got filled with fury.

That's when I realized that this wasn't just any pain-killer. His strength and the immunity to pain were not natural. All the pieces fell into place. My attempts to wield this axe and failing sealed the deal. This narcotic he smoked gave him strength... No, that's not quite right. It didn't give him strength. It let him use it. No man should move as he does and perform feats of strength as he does. Not without hurting himself. The body can exert itself like that for a second and not more. Any more and it would damage itself. That's why you feel pain in the first place. But what feats could you do if you were not afraid of the damage and could not feel the pain?

I watched as the man turned and faced me. He lumbered forward at first, but quickly turned that into a stride. My arms pulled at the axe a couple more times in vain before I had to stand and fight. We were both unarmed, but I now realized that didn't matter much for him. He broke out into a sprint for the last few meters. I could not help but be put on the back foot by the charging bull of a man. It's a desperate attempt to take a defensive position, but there isn't anywhere to go.

My arms flew up to protect myself. Nerick's feet left the ground and his whole weight flew at me like a missile. He turned himself into a weapon, feet first.

No one expects you to open with the flying drop kick, huh?

Furious, roided out, over a hundred kilos flying at me at twenty-five km/h. His weight caught me square in the chest and sent me flying. I went straight through the bookshelf behind me. There wasn't a wall to stop me either. Wood splintered, books and paper flew. Behind the library a drop waited to welcome me. Below was another level of the throne room's halls. I had missed the stairs, obviously, and so I plummeted down three and a half meters. I hit shoulder first and my head took the softer second blow and it knocked me out like a light.

Chapter 100

Baldwin and a cadre of Count Aaron's mercenaries delved through the maze of corridors toward the front lines. A melody of clanking steel presided over their mad dash which nearly got itself lost several times. The initial bedlam that threw the Brightkeep into turmoil had at last settled down. They passed by runners who carried vital information and sent them on the right path. Yet the battle had not swung in their favor, the bleeding was stopped.

The adventurer kept his eyes forward, but everyone else kept looking behind them from time to time. A looming fear, that mysterious girl in the cloak would once more materialize from out of the ether.

“Are you sure we should have left her behind?” The mercenary officer huffed as he struggled to keep the same pace as Baldwin.

“I get it. I get it,” Baldwin bemoaned.. “She'll be alright, so shut up about it. Worry about yourself. We're better off staying out of their way.”

“A giant? She's not any taller than a little girl!”

“Doesn't matter. She's my superior officer and I'm not going to ignore her orders. She's short, but she's a giant when it comes to chi.”

The mercenary couldn't wrap his head around it. He heard the story of the one drunken man getting his jaw snapped in two, but couldn't tie it together with the image of the little martial artist he saw with his own eyes. His mercenaries hardly saw any of the Bannermen at all over the past few days. Every one of them were elusive, solitary and impossible to approach. Their behavior and their status made it as if they were occupying and completely different world than themselves. A wall existed between them as a moat does the peasant and his lords. Were it not for the battle at hand, the arrogance would have driven his anger to another level.

“Let her worry about the monster. You got bigger problems on your hands,” Baldwin said with disdain.

The Bannerman's eyes carried with them the air of one talking down to the child. His men could do nothing but bite their tongues. If there were monsters about, the best way to survive would be to listen to the expert. Common sense would always falter in the face of the

super natural and monsters were that given form.

Now that information stood a chance to disseminate, the garrison quickly reorganized itself. How up the creek without a paddle the situation had become quickly became clear. All those soldiers and knights captured without a fight on the first day seized the main gatehouse. Reinforcements pouring in from the outside would be impossible. The necessary equipment were kilometers away at the siege camps surrounding the Duke's citadel. It would take days to move them back, if Count Aaron had any to spare.

First and foremost, the thought he'd dock their pay weighed heavily on their minds.

Without assistance their options were severely limited. Tearing the portcullis off would be an exercise in futility. Iron forged with ancient wisdom fortified everything in the Brightkeep. No steel in their possession had the strength to break it. Whatever sorcery went into, the masonry has befuddled their sappers.

Baldwin reached the front lines first. Two opposing barricades had been set up at opposite ends of a wide hallway. Fifty meters down that hallway lay the main entrance to the Brightkeep's main gatehouse: a complex which housed the all important winch and lock mechanisms. Two separate chambers were bridged together by an arched walkway that formed the keystone to the solid mountain of ancient stone. Baldwin and his mercenary hanger-ons comprehended immediately that numerical advantage became moot in these closed quarters. Aaron's mercenaries held the advantage that they would win the eventual battle of attrition, but it was time which would betray them.

“Who is in charge here?” Baldwin demanded as he approached the nearest group manning the barricade.

They had taken refuge behind a mound of upturned tables and wooden boxes. They appeared beleaguered, but still in working health. He soon discovered the injured laid out nearby out of harm's way. Their bodies were covered in burn marks. Most were wrapped up like bodies ready for a funeral procession.

“That would be me,” a shaken younger man said and raised his hand. “The sergeant got burnt up on the last attack. He ain't looking good enough to stay on his feet, so I've had us stay put and keep em in check till reinforcements arrive.”

The young man's eyes spied the mercenary officer

accompanying Baldwin the moment he finally caught up.

“Patrick? Thank the Almighty,” the man sighed in relief.

“Jeremy, wasn't it?” Patrick answered. “I've brought another dozen with me. Got one of the Bannerman boys with me here too.”

“Baldwin of Nerick's Redeemers,” the adventurer said, his tone already showing boredom with the common men.

The other mercenaries started talking amongst themselves. They wondered if a Bannerman would be able to solve their dilemma.

Baldwin impatience overflowed and with clicked his tongue, “Well? Out with it!”

Jeremy appeared shaken by the adventurer's pressure which weighed heavily on the young man. His voice cracked as the words vomited out of him.

“A monster slayer is what we need. I heard they spotted a fire lizard, but this is a whole other thing entirely. I-I've not seen anything like it, let alone been trained for it!”

“Lizardmen work jobs like yours all the time. You'd have to have your head stuck in the bucket, not just wet behind the ears if you've never—“

Baldwin's brows knit together as he thought aloud. He remembered the details of that briefing he heard shortly after the ball that happened a few days prior.

“Fu fu fu fu!” A boisterous laughter rolled in from down the hall.

Jeremy and the surrounding men shook with fear as they cowered further into cover.

“What in the hells?” Patrick swore and stuck his head out from behind the barricade.

A towering figure stood proud and tall at the end of the hall. Its inhuman properties were readily apparent. It being female was unmistakable, what with the massive mounds of flesh suspended from her chest. He could tell from so far away that it's a giant too. She stood a head, or perhaps almost two, taller than himself.

“Oh ho ho ho ho! Is this the best you rotten conniving cowards can muster? Is a dagger to the back the limit of your martial prowess?” She bellowed while animating her word with the movement of her arms and a flurry of various poses.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Patrick screamed at his men. “She's right out there in the open. Shoot her!”

“We tried!” one of the mercenaries voices cracked. “Everything bounced right off!”

“You wont have the right bolt or arrow heads,” Baldwin said as he took a look at the pink haired girl at the end of the hall. “It's a wyvern. And a big one at that.”

Baldwin inspected a nearby arrow and tossed it aside with a click of his tongue.

“It's not quite dragons scales, but close enough. You'd need to be a point blank to have a hope of piercing wyvern hide with what you got here.”

Baldwin inspected one of the iron tipped arrow heads sitting in a bundle nearby. He prodded the tip, found it wanting, and then tossed it aside like refuse.

“And there's something else which makes doing that... unlikely.”

They looked over all the men who had participated in the last attempts to assault the gatehouse. There were shy of two dozen men with second and third degree burns. Some were still conscious and rolling about in pain. Others were barely clinging to life and would not survive long if proper first-aid, curatives or healing magics were not applied.

“That's the weird thing too...” one of the mercenaries spoke up with a shaky voice. “She let us drag them back here.”

“None of that matters if we can't take that gate back, you moron!” Patrick roared. “They took more than the gate. They've barred a door open at the wall too. If we can't close this one, we'll be cut off from the main force at the base camp. Hundreds of other soldiers stationed along the walls will pour in here. They'll execute us all for sure!”

“Save your breath,” Baldwin sighed. “We're not breaking through here. It's not the wyvern alone that's the problem: the men waiting behind it with sword and spears at the ready.”

He glanced once again and gazed beyond the wyvern with her wings on her hips and counted the gleaming iron tips waiting at the barricade set up in the doorway to the gatehouse itself.

“If you really want to you can keep sending your men to be incinerated till she runs out of fuel for that fiery breath of hers. But then you'd have to take on those claws and the fresh men waiting behind.”

“And you were telling me earlier that this doesn't concern you,” Patrick growled.

“Monster extermination is always a Bannerman's concern—“

Baldwin turned his head away in spite and pondered where the rest of his companions were.

“—If Mistress Breena were here we might have some more options.”

“The wizard lady, right?”

“Bluntly put, but not incorrect... If she hasn't arrived yet I doubt she will anytime soon. We have yet to encounter the third monster. There's a beastman type prowling around here. Part of some group that were spotted further north over a month ago... An incubus. A suspected incubus lord at that. We've got confirmed sighting of the Thorn Knight. I can confirm the wyvern here. That leaves only the canine unaccounted for... Some sort of spell-caster. Odd for a beastman—”

Yet that doesn't explain the shadowy figure from before.

Baldwin thought to himself. He wondered if the intel they had gathered was incomplete. He noticed his attention had strayed for too long and snapped back to reality.

“No matter,” he grumbled to himself and then belted out his orders: “Gather up your fleetest and follow me!”

“Hold on. This time you are gonna tell me what we're doing,” Patrick said in protest.

“Butting our heads against this defensive line is fruitless. We'll search for an alternative route. If we have to we'll find a maintenance shaft for the chains of the Brightkeep doors. We'll blow smoke in, or something, and flush the room. You. Inform your men to keep their eyes and ears open. Meanwhile, we'll provide a diversion to divide their defenses. We'll keep prodding till we find a break in their line.”

“Beats sitting around,” Patrick nodded and then jabbed his finger at a selection of his men. “Alright, boys, let's go!”

Baldwin, Patrick and a fresh group of another twelves mercenaries moved on from the camp besieging the gatehouse. Their destination was unclear. None of them had a working and intrinsic knowledge of the Keep's layout, but they knew not a single one of them would manage a breakthrough via the main entrance.

“Our boys started marking the top of the door frames around these parts,” Patrick said as he pointed to the runes scrawled on the stone. “Too many kept getting lost on the way to the shitter, the canteen, you name it.”

“I don't need such details, you idiot,” Baldwin hissed. “Keep us around the bulkhead where the gate mechanisms. We'll find something. Somewhere.”

The away party spent the next few minutes climbing and descending stairs. They crossed one way across the Brightkeep and then doubled back. Their eyes searched fervently for some clue as their fingers traced over every suspiciously loose stone.

“You ever get the feeling something's wrong with this place,” Patrick said out of the blue.

“I don't care,” Baldwin said dismissively.

“No. Hear me out for once, you arrogant prick. I'm talking about how we always have to walk around the long way when getting from one side of the keep to the other. There's nowhere you can cut through the middle.”

“Shut up and keep looking,” Baldwin spat and quickened his pace to put distance between himself and the mercenary.

Baldwin did not get far before he came across a T junction in the hallway. He paused to look between heading left and right. Much to

his disdain, this gave the mercenaries a chance to catch up before he managed to swallow his anger.

“Don't worry,” Patrick said as he pointed toward some writing on the wall. “Seems my boys already marked this place out too.

The Bannerman let out a long sigh, leaned up against the wall and crossed his arms. Patrick strode forward and fumbled with his elementary literacy to read the white chalk marks.

“Yu... No that's not it. Yeah, here we go... You... Messed....Up... What?”

The mercenary face was dumbstruck as he read it a second time and found he had made no mistake.

“You messed up?” Patrick read aloud again and then unleashed his fury on the men. “Which one of you did this? You thought this would funny a few days ago, right? Now that I'll beat your ass for this!”

“Wasn't me,” one of the men spoke up.

“Yeah. I got stationed on the far west wing. I never walked this way before,” said another.

Patrick growled, but spotted another line of writing. He had to lean in to read the fine print.

“What kind of runes are these supposed to be?”

A few of his men gathered around him and looked over his shoulders.

“Oh, I know these,” one of them spoke up excitedly. “These are them phonetic runes. They don't spell anything. You sound em out.”

“You reading children fables again?” Another spoke up to insult the other. “What sound does a cow make?” he said with a mocking voice.

“S-shut up! Look! It ain't hard. Even an unreading buffoon like you can do it. See? It says...”

“I can read that much, you moron! Get out of my way,” Patrick shouted and pushed the men off his back. “It says... Ka? Yeah,

that's it. Ka.... boo? No, not that. Bloo. Kabloo... Eee?.. Kablooey? What the hell does that mean?"

Baldwin snapped to attention. He had ignored the bumbling men till now, but his gut instinct churned up a storm in his chest. He leaped away from the wall and hollered toward the men.

"Stop! Get away from—"

He was far too late. After the last syllable rolled off Patrick's tongue, the runes turned a crimson red. The mercenaries gathered around it watched with stupefied expressions as the white chalk changed color. Tendrils spread from the runes and raced along the walls. Their bodies were still limp and unready when following explosion ripped through the hall. A blast wave of fire made of raw magic power engulfed the region. Baldwin remained the sole man present to throw his arms up in a futile effort to protect himself. Yet he could not be prepared for the force of the blast. He watched the backs of the men at ground zero disintegrate before he felt his back slam into the wall and the fire wash over his body.

Destruction ravaged the hall way in a 3 meter radius. The ground end up pulverized and turned to gravel. Debris fell periodically from the ceiling and rained dust all around. Baldwin woke up a few seconds after being bashed against the wall. He had been laid out on his side and it took everything he had to push himself to sit up. He counted all four of his limbs and all ten toes. A small amount of blood, from nothing more than cuts and scrapes, were flecked across the ground.

A trickle of red liquid poured over one eye and irritated it into being forced shut. With his other eye he peered through the grungy clouds saw another seven bodies. They were motionless. No coughing, wheezing or moans of pain. There wasn't a trace of the other bodies. It's likely they were one with the dust, but there appeared another figure beyond the clouds. A new shorter silhouette walked into the scene with a playful gait.

And along with it came the sing song voice of a little girl. She hummed a tra la la to herself while stepping over the bodies strewn across the floor.

Baldwin watched helplessly through as outline of the tiny girl improbably, and inappropriately, pulled one of the bodies off the floor. She pulled the dead weight along and spun the limp dance partner in

her arms. He watched in horror as a round object rolled from its shoulders and the body fell to the ground with a thud. The loose object It rolled across the girl's arm, behind her head and down the other arm like play thing. A flick of her arm sent it rolling behind her back and she back kicked it aside without a care.

A pair of green eyes pieced through the dust clouds like dancing will-o-wisps. But their danced ended when they noticed and locked right onto Baldwin. He grimaced and tried to pull himself off the floor, his body suffered from shock and failed.

The hazy image got clearer until the creatures true form revealed itself. An adorable little girl's face peeked through the dust, but something horrifying came through with it. A pair of large horns jutted out from the top of its head. Inhuman goat-like ears protruded from the sides of her head. It had shaggy furred forearms and legs and its footsteps were announced with a clopping of hooves where petite little feet should be.

A demon burst through with the flair of an actress taking to the main stage. She fluttered grabbed hold of her cloak and flourished it. That was enough to create a gust of wind strong enough to blow the haze away.

It had the visage of a cute little girl, a little angel of the choir, but twisted in form with the markings of a demon. Baldwin looked for, but could not find, the leathery spade tail. His eyes could only see a brown and white shaggy goat's tail. A great sense of unease fell over him too, the girl was far too scantily dressed and flagrantly disavowed all common decency.

“I didn't think that spell would actually work, but you can never overestimate stupidity, can you?”

“Exploding Runes...” Baldwin pushed out between grit teeth.

“Ha ha ha,” the demon chuckled. “You know em? One of my favorites. A lot of bang for little buck.”

The demon gave him a wink and seemed impervious to the otherwise mood destroying murderous gaze he threw back at her.

“You filthy little wench. You putrid rotten demonic whore!”

“Hey, slow down there. Save pet names for the bedroom,” she said as her smug expression grew more intense.

She dropped her strumpet act and transitioned seamlessly into a embarrassed little school girl act.

“But I'm afraid I'll have to turn you down. You see, I'm already seeing someone,” she said with blushing cheeks which she cradled in her bestial paws. “It's kinda serious and a bit complicated. I'm sure you understand.”

Baldwin tried to capitalize on her momentary distraction, but his attempt to throw himself forward and reach out for his sword fell short. He had spotted it on the ground in front of him, but it was just out of reach. Now he's laid helplessly on his stomach. Spread eagle across the floor and more vulnerable than before.

His cheek dragged his across the fresh gravel floor and stared desperately toward his sword, but managed to do nothing more than witness the demon's hoof as it stomped down on the blade and smashed it in half. She squat down in front of the man, out of arm's reach. Her elbows rested on her knees which she used to cradle her jaw. He looked up and got his first real glance at her eerily inhuman green iris goat eyes.

“Stop with the tiresome bad boy act. I'm not here to play with you.”

“This is not a game, demon! You'll pay for your cowardice!”

“Coward am I? That's rich coming from a man who is part of a Redeemers club. Alright. Let's play a game. Let's play: what did the man have to redeem himself of?”

Baldwin's eyes flared with anger and he flashed his teeth with a snarl. She ignored his fury and looked off the side, cupping her chin in thought.

“Did ya knock up some nobleman's daughter? Ha ha ha, nah. I kid. You ain't that clever or near handsome enough. Oh, did you steal something? Hmm, no, probably nothing so valuable as to throw your life away with the Bannerman... Ah, yes of course— ”

She looked right at the man and saw through him.

“—you killed someone.”

The demon noticed the slight twitch in Baldwin's face.

“Oh ho, so that's how it is?”

“You know nothing,” he said between grinding teeth.

“Please, spare me,” she shot back with a laugh. “You humans have at least twenty or so things you do when you lie. Don't lie to a demon. It's a waste of time.”

A strong hand—a paw—violently grab hold of his hair and yanked his head. She forced him to look right at him and her rectangular pupils which caused a rumble sensation deep in his bones. The pitch blackness of her pupils stared back at him..

“That's a big no no, you know?”

He tried to look away, but her pupils, black as the abyss, pulled them back. A black hole tugged at his very soul. He stared into them, and something beyond her eyes looked back into him.

“But it wasn't just anyone. No. It's someone you knew. Family? No... A friend. Yes, that's it. Isn't it? I can see you wear it like a seabird over your shoulder. And so you know— People like you all end up in the same place. Believe me. I've seen them. This is some genuine eye witness testimony here. If you think gallivanting around the world killing monsters minding their own business or being happy with their mates will make everything peachy keen— They always end up in the same place. And like them, you got another thing coming.”

The adventurer's head slammed into the ground when she released her grip. He remained motionless for a moment. His reaction was muted. A loose tooth didn't reach high in the priority list. A deluge of memories were fought to be at the top of a pile of repressed memories. Baldwin's heartbeat increased, sweat began to ooze from his pores and his breathing became ragged. Meanwhile, the demon grinned and admired her handiwork before pressing on with business.

“Now. Unless you want us to pry into that... Tell me where the big fish is. Where's that wizard bitch hiding?”

“I'd... I'd never tell you that,” Baldwin seethed.

A sense of camaraderie overrode his fear and he bravely stared back at the demon from below. She let out a long sigh and her playful eyes became impatient.

“I told you, didn't I. You don't lie to a demon. Seriously now, you pantomime your tells more flamboyantly than the queerest cross-dressing actor at the theater.”

A pressure that Baldwin had never weathered before weighed down on him. While his battered body felt the weight of the world holding him down, the demon's aura crushed his soul further down.

“Do you really think there's nothing I could do that wouldn't make you talk?”

A glint of red swept across her green eyes for a moment. He didn't take long to change his tune.

“I—I don't know,” he replied weakly.

“See? That wasn't so hard was it?” she said with a gentle smile. “Still disappointing, yes, but don't you feel better? Anyways, I got business with her. I gotta see that my man's plan works out and all that. It's my job to keep her check and all that. Hard work. Laborious, I know. But it'll be worth it.”

The girl stared at him for a few moments longer. She sighed a second time and stood back up. She brushed the dust from herself and rolled her shoulders as if they were sore.

“If I'm right, and I'm rarely wrong, it'll be quite a show. There's a lot out there that will be to die for.”

She about-faced and folded her arms behind her head. As she slowly strolled away, she left one last request to the man splayed across the floor.

“So how about you take five and then pick your sorry ass off the ground and go get her for me? I'll be sticking around here for a while.”

She appeared to have lost all interest in Baldwin, turned her back to him, and resumed walking away.

“What a waste of good bait. I was sure she'd be the one to sniff out this breadcrumb trail.”

Baldwin felt a great weight lift off of him. His eyes felt like tearing up, but he kept himself together. The man slowly pushed himself up till he was on his hands and knees. That's the extent of

what he could do right away. His raspy breaths were pained as he struggled to combat the pain aching over his entire body.

“Just kidding!” the little demon girl's voice chanted merrily from above.

Baldwin turned his head to see the demon was looming over him.

“You didn't think I'd be that naive, right? I mean, who lets that one survivor crawl away like that? If you're gonna kill a bunch of people you need to do your basic due diligence," she recanted as if this were common knowledge her victim should be aware of. "Take this message to your master, worm!” She hammed it up, like an amateur actress. “How blasé. How tripe. How... How cliché.”

The demon laughed at her own performance. Then she turned her eyes downward and gifted the man with a gentle expression.

“Nah. You see—when you catch a little fry on your line. Don't throw it back—”

The demon held out her arm and Baldwin watched in horror as a purple portal opened above it. A large metal object fell through empty space from out of the portal and it crashed into the floor. She grabbed hold of before it cracked the ground wide open. It's made of an unearthly metal and had an otherworldly gleam. A weapon in the shape of a large scythe. A quivering green orb of pure energy existed where a part of the blade should be. It pulsed with magical energy that caused the pebbles beneath her to jumble around her hooves.

Her gentle smile turned into an ear to ear smile, bearing her fangs.

“—Recast it!”

She raised the blade up high and brought it down. An executioner's axe, quivering and vibrating with barely contained magic energies. Baldwin felt a brief sting of pain, but it ended quickly. And so did his everything he had.

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Nerick's bulk crashed down onto the ground with an earth splitting thud. He had leaped down from the makeshift hole left by Laven's hasty departure from level above. A three meter drop

separated the floors, but his knees somehow managed to absorb the shock. A pair of predatory eyes, inflamed with rage, scanned the room for Laven's body. He slung his axe over his shoulder and readied himself to bring it down, but his prey was nowhere to be seen.

Laven left a crater behind, but not his corpse. The Bannerman strode over and inspected a shattered wooden floor. This lower level of the tower had stone underneath for half its width and then transitioned to hardwood. His quarry had used up the last bit of luck in the horseshoe up his ass and missed the stonework.

Nerick growled and mumbled swears. His patience renewed itself when he picked up on a trial of blood which Laven left behind. A bloody nose and chest would leave something like that. The fox had dashed into the brush, but the bloodhound had the scent. Another winding maze of knickknacks was all that separated the two. A museum of treasures from a Kingdom's glory days.

With axe firmly in hand, the hulking man let loose another long drag on his pipe and followed the trail. It led him around the corner, but the spots of blood got smaller until they vanished altogether. He clicked his tongue and swept his eyes across the surroundings.

Shelves of ancient books, pedestals with vases and other statues and artifacts, suits of armor stowed away behind protective bars and glass. Others were welded or tied securely to mannequins. Locked chests and paintings lined the way in addition to polished mirrors both small and tall.

“Are we really going to go through this?” Nerick shouted as he spun on the spot. “Stop wasting both our time, Come out and fight me like a man!”

No response. His eyes darted from corner to corner. He searched high and low through all the spots a man could hide himself away in. Laven had said his plan was to buy time and that began to grate on his patience. It would take hours for anyone to get through those everiron doors. And so far as Nerick knew, no one had started.

“I'll level this whole room if I have to!” Nerick bellowed.

He brought his axe down on a nearby bookshelf. He threw a furious punch through the wreckage and smashed through to the other side and into another tight alleyway winding itself through the cluttered mess. It was clear to his left and right. In a fit of rage, the man backhanded a precious vase from its pedestal and let it smash into

pieces. It's at that point he realized his loud rampages would make it difficult to actually hear Laven. Nerick let his jaw slacken, so that his teeth would stop grinding together, and steadied his breathing.

A quiet tapping of steeled toes passed through one ear and he homed in on it. He did his best to walk softly as though he were deer hunting. The sound got increasingly louder till it sounded so close at a blind corner that he could not contain himself and sprung like a coiled spring that could not be held back any longer.

Nerick's axe sprung around the corner and bit into something hard, but malleable. When he caught up to his axe, the only thing it had decapitated was the helmet off a wooden mannequin.

“We don't have to go through this,” Nerick repeated himself as he grew more and more impatient. “Come out now and I'll make it quick. One blow to the neck. It will be over in an instant.”

“I hear you actually stay alive for a few seconds,” came a voice echoing from every direction.

The man faced one direction and then another, but no matter where he turned his ears, the origin of the voice never solidified. It rushed toward him, slipped between his feet and then vanished around another corner. He heard it echo softly once more before being replaced by silence. Nerick's frustration continued to grow as Laven managed to keep just out of his reach. His new tactic would be to keep him talking.

“Are you that afraid to die?” Nerick asked the disembodied voice. “I'd say that's why you've lost. No guts, no glory.”

“And are you afraid of feeling pain?” the voice shot back.

Nerick snarled and swung his axe into an adjacent chest. Various valuables poured out from it. Nearly all of them were bent, ruined and all-round smashed to pieces. But once again, there was no one hiding inside nor behind it.

“If you weren't afraid of dying you would take on the Thorn Knight instead, wouldn't you?”

“Shut up!” Nerick howled back.

He clamped his jaw shut as soon as he realized he was the one being a loud mouth and giving his position away. Laven would play his

game better than him if he continued this way.

"It's more like you need her to fight your fights for you. You craven little shit. Don't you have an ounce of pride? Are you a man or not?"

There was silence, but it remained an empty silence. Nerick continued to wander the winding and random paths while calling out to the void.

"Don't you think it's pathetic a man has to rely on a woman like that? Or is it that she's had a soft spot for weaklings all along? Wouldn't that be a surprise? The merciless Thorn, slayer of hundreds, has a need to play babysitter to a useless and spineless excuse for a man."

Nerick nodded at his own words and smiled. He felt something in the silence shift and he pressed on with the attack.

"You wouldn't be the first. I thought this whole time you might be different. But you are like all the rest."

He could not hold back the ear to ear smile on his face. The man had to catch his pipe before it slipped out from his lips. A choice few words were building up in his chest and he let them loose.

"Couldn't get yourself a nice human girl?"

The silence carried with it a certain tremble in the air. Nerick pressed onward.

"Or did you get dumped by someone? She start taking it from a better man? You wallow about in self pity and anger? Did ya find yourself so empty that you'd give up your soul and feed it to the demons?"

His ear twitched and the sound his head to the right. His eyes peered through the debris, but it was someone breathing that he heard clearer than before. Nerick then heard the patter of footsteps as it ran away. It was like a startled rabbit which made eye contact with a predator. Their eyes met through all that blocking their way.

"That's what I'll never understand about guys like you. It's not as if it's hard to get yourself a good lay. Hell, it ain't that much harder to find some bumpkin to knock up if you want a family. So why, oh why, do your kind go running into the bosom of demons? Don't you

get your the problem? It's gonna kill humanity off one day. Do you only care about yourself? You ignore all the weird parts and a pretty face is good enough for ya?"

Instinct led the man now. He wound his way through the maze and he could feel a building pressure in his forehead. Nerick could physically feel the proximity. He could smell the man's scent, the sound of his breathing and the footsteps as he scurried away.

The disembodied voice finally spoke up, "Don't act like you know anything, Nerick."

The Bannerman zeroed in on where Laven was. He barely managed to contain himself from barging through the walls separating the two.

"Same to you, Laven. You think you're so clever, don't you? Well, you're a young enough looking guy, so believe me when I say you haven't seen anything. Not yet... I've seen your story played before. Right before I kill em, I notice the emptiness in their eyes. Souls sucked out. Missing a bit of their humanity. Just—existing—with nothing else going on upstairs. Living day to day, feeding off all the sex they could want... I'd say I do those men a favor when I killed em."

Nerick turned another corner and say row upon row of mirrors. He could see his battle weary, battered, bleeding and scarred body from every angle. The man ignored the ugly visage which would look back at him with bloodshot eyes and homed in on the scent and sound of his prey.

"Or do you get off on that? Being the bitch to demons? You give up your Almighty given soul, and your freedom, for some tail? A weakling like you would give it all up to feel safe? Safe in the arms of some big strong monsters?"

He could feel Laven's presence stronger than before. A thumping in his skull told him the man was around the corner. His gnarled knuckles wrapped tightly around the haft of his axe and he prepared to raise it high and lunge forward for the killing blow.

"No one is making me their bitch, Nerick—" Laven's voice came from around the corner.

"I'll see about that!" the Bannerman said as he rounded the corner.

He planned to rush in at a sprint, but he stopped dead in his tracks. It wasn't the confusing mirror images surrounding him. Neither did a multitude of Laven's reflected in the mirror. Nerick witnessed him standing tall at the end of a dead-end alleyway. The broken man stood his ground no more than ten meters away. His leather armor had been split in two at the chest. Coagulated blood formed ugly scabs across his chest and the bridge of his nose. His right arm dangled lifelessly at his side, but there's something in his left hand.

Laven held up the end of the long object between his teeth. A string of sorts. The corners of his lips curled up with a smile. His eyes were set dead ahead and he talked through clenched teeth.

"—Because I'm already a real son of bitch."

He yanked the object away with his one arm and the string came free and dropped low. Laven thrust the pipe-like object forward. A loud pop and whiz exploded from the pipe. Had it been further away, Nerick may have been able to react in time. But a light flew toward him and made contact faster than his reaction time could process it. Something struck the hulking man in the chest at the same time he threw up his arms too late to block it from hitting his face.

A fizzle and crackling sound dominated what would otherwise be the continuation of the silence. Slowly lowering his arms, Nerick looked down at his chest. A little rocket of sorts was in the middle of a futile effort to continue flying. The head of the rocket had collapsed against his breast plate, but the fuel burning up behind it kept it flying horizontally, but ultimately nowhere.

Two men stood by and watched the little firework that could. Nerick looked up first with a wry smile and a cocked eyebrow. His face asked: Is that it? Laven assessed the situation, but Nerick quickly discovered he was not distressed at any lack of impact. Rather, Laven, seemingly satisfied that it hit, quickly turned his back and threw his arm across his face.

Nerick could not help but looked down a second time. Curiosity got the better of him and he was greeted by a second even louder pop and great flash of white. Three successive pulses of light erupted from the tiny firecracker. It reflected off the mirrors and back onto one another which amplified the flare many times over.

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I tried my best to cover my eyes, but that couldn't block out all

the light which lit the treasure room up like the sun. It didn't matter that my eye were shut tight and sealed off by the flesh and bone of my arm, the flash of white briefly whited out my vision. If that wasn't enough, the thing going off was loud enough to cause my ears to ring. My vision blurred and my balance wavered for a moment. I suppose it would be better to say the small little alleyway had been rocked by a literal flash-bang.

But I wasn't at the center of it. That's where I heard the howling which put the bang to shame.

Nerick's axe dropped to the ground as he reflexively reached up to cup his eyes with his hands. A blood curdling roar caused the mirrors surrounding him to shudder. They began to shatter when he stumbled backwards and crashed into one. And it took just one to shatter before the others began falling all over the place as well. Shards of mirror rained down upon him. Dozens of fresh little cuts appeared over his bare arms and head. That served to throw him into an even greater fury as he thrashed about and brought the entire house of mirrors raining down on his head.

That served as the cue for me to skedaddle. I pushed through the first few wobbly steps and trouble seeing and blitzed past Nerick at a full on sprint. I wasn't sure if he heard me or no, and I'm guessing he didn't, but that did not stop the man from swinging his fists in my general direction as I brushed past him.

“Get back here you little shit!” I heard him scream as I managed to lurch away.

Looking back showed a Nerick complete with eyes blinking relentlessly. Every time he tried to pry his eyes open they shut again immediately. A smokestack would be envious of the amount coming out of his pipe, but it didn't seem to matter how much of that pain killing narcotic his sucked into his lungs. His eyes refused to stay open. He stumbled around discombobulated too. That deafening blast must have scrambled his inner ear for the time being.

I would have loved to have something to strike with, but I really had to use the chance to run instead. None of this glass would do it, the man's thick hide and thicker skull managed to shrug it off. There had to be something in this collection I could use.

I cradled my right arm against my chest and could do nothing but grit my teeth and bear the pain. It had dislocated from the fall.

There's also a chance it may have fractured around the joint too, so I was hesitant in setting it back into place. That left me to worm my way through this god forsaken place and avoid the raging minotaur in the maze.

That flare saved my life and may have helped give me an edge from here on out, but using it has resulted in catastrophic mission failure. As I ran, the brief moment of safety gave me a moment to reflect on how bad I had fucked up. How was I going to signal the other stations along the wall. Everyone at the gatehouses were on borrowed time. If help didn't arrive in hours, they'd be overrun. If it didn't come in a day or so, they'd likely weaken with starvation and dehydration.

But I didn't have long to think, because Nerick had emerged and thundered down the hall after me like a great bloody bolder. He savagely smashed everything in his path. His eyes were bloodshot red, like an actual demon's. Not from the rage, I'd wager, but rather from the damage done to his eyes. Not that it would stop him. He swung his axe around carelessly with one arm while the other hand cupped over his face to block out what little light he could.

I came around the next corner and yelped in surprise. For a moment I thought I'd run headlong into someone, but quickly saw it was a statue instead. A life-sized one. A soldier that appeared as if it had come out of the Terracotta Army itself. And he wasn't alone. There were others like him, but also a multitude of other stone and marble statues. Mind you, the marble ones were more Roman-like in appearance. Elegant works of art no doubt depicting characters of old from this place.

I didn't have the time to admire any of them due to Nerick being on my heels. As he came around the same corner my fleet footsteps had me a precious few meters ahead and out of the way. I looked over my shoulder to see him barrel right into that statue. He tackled it with wild abandon and smash his axe into its chest. Sparks flew as the iron met stone and the ancient and priceless statue was reduced to dust.

It took him a few moments to realize he had not caught up to me, but instead destroyed a man-sized statue. He pulverized the decapitated head rolling by him with nothing but his fist. Another loud bestial roar spurred me onward and to dive around another corner and out of sight.

“He's got his balance back, but not his sight,” I mumbled to myself. “But maybe...”

Nerick couldn't tell for the first few seconds that he had smashed into stone and was pulverizing it with his hands. That got me to thinking:

"If he's killed his sense of pain—then his sense of touch is probably screwed up too."

His entire nervous system, heat and cold included, was fouled up beyond all repair. A thousand little cuts wouldn't amount to much. Nothing short of complete destruction would do him in. I didn't have the strength to get past that armor and hit any vital organ which would stop him dead in his tracks either.

My eyes searched desperately around the room for a weapon, any weapon. I'd take something improvised. Anything. Yet no matter where I looked, the only things in this quadrant of the treasure room were statues. Their weapons were part of the display. Chiseled out of stone and marble. Their points looked sinister enough, but were no doubt heavy and brittle. Let alone attached to the whole statue itself.

And that's when it came to me. I didn't have the strength. But maybe something else did.

I looked left and right and opened my ears. Nerick's destructive rampage took a wrong turn and he busied himself crushing everything somewhere else. Nearby, but still elsewhere. I turned in the opposite direction and ran until I stumbled across a large opening on the floor. A display for one fine piece of craftsmanship. An equestrian statue. Life-sized, but still bigger than the rest. It rested upon a large pedestal, as high as my chest.

A depiction of great knight on horseback. The horse reared upwards on its hind legs. His armor, and the barding of the horse, both had a sort of dreadful appearance to them. Rather than inspire hope in fellow soldiers, its design had been purposed to instill dread. There were spikes and other evil looking ornaments, yet the statue's pose was stereotypically heroic. The horse had a forehead spike like a unicorn.

Its appearance wasn't what concerned me though. What concerned me were three other factors. First, it's weight. Second its height above the floor. Third: the way it rattled with each rumble Nerick's smashing caused nearby. It wasn't all that stable on its rear hooves. The thing's age had long since begun to show.

But it meant nothing without bait. And that's when the image of him attacking the lone statue returned. With one good arm I couldn't do much, but with a little adrenaline I could muster some emergency strength and resolve. There were plenty of statues, but too large for me to move in my condition. I compromised by dragging a smaller pedestal into the center of the room in the shadow of the larger statue. Next would be a simple bust I could wrap my one good arm around and lug over. Last would be involve making it believable.

I bit down hard and pulled my bloody and ripped leather jerkin and shirt off. Trying to pull it off my dislocated and no doubt fractured right arm was excruciating. Yet I managed to pull it off without broadcasting my position with a groan of pain. With those clothes in hand I draped them over the bust and scrambled out of the way.

Now I'd need to position myself behind the statue. I underestimated how hard it would be to scale a chest high obstacle with only one arm. But I jumped as high as able, grabbed hold with my left and threw my legs over the top. I rolled a couple times over my right arm and that time I could not keep quiet.

A brief silence hovered over the room and I doubted covering my mouth a couple seconds too late would help. Nerick's swearing and destruction turned in the right direction. I scrambled onto my feet and positioned myself behind the statue. By wedging myself between it's backside and the nearby wall I could gain some leverage. But I'd have to use my body as the lever.

“When I find you—I'm no longer gonna make it quick!” Nerick screamed as he smashed his way into the scene. “I'm gonna hack your arms and legs off. I'm gonna drag your bleeding torso in front of your whores and then I'm gonna stomp your guts out and cut off your head right in front of them!”

I couldn't see him from where I lay in wait. My feet had left the ground, my left shoulder ground against the wall and my feet were planted fimly against the statue. I'd have to extend my knees with all my might when the time came.

My sole cue that it time had come was the volume of Nerick's furious roars.

“Stop running—And face me like a man!” he screamed.

I could feel the rumble of his footsteps as he bounded into the room. But that had nothing on the crunching sounds my shoulders and

knees gave out as I started to push with all my might.

A crushing sound reverberated throughout the room and an axe-fall with the floor caused a minor quake. It jostled the statue and I could hear the snapping sound of fractures alone the statue's base begin to spread. Nerick's face, full of triumph having cut down the bust, I could picture it quickly turning to anger. A lack of blood and a blood curdling death scream caused him rage to spike yet again.

“Stop playing your games! Come out and face me!” he bellowed once more.

“One last game!” I screamed as my bones began to pop and my muscles tear.

One more loud crack. I couldn't be sure if it was me, or the statue.

“A game of catch!”

The statue gave way. It's top heavy bulk, separated from the weakened and broken base, carried it onward. As it tumbled forward my body was no longer pinched between the statue and the wall and so it dropped to the floor. I could hear the crunch as I hit the ground. My muscles felt like they were on fire. As if someone had poured vodka onto some open wounds; that's how the lactic acid coursing through my veins felt.

I got one good glance at ground zero. Nerick wasted the first second looking about for the source of the commotion. He spent the next looking up. His eyes were still unable to focus, but they could still catch the oncoming wall of stone. He didn't have the time to react after that. He let out one last noise; a mix between a roar of defiance and a terrified scream. He tried to throw up his axe to defend himself, but it cracked in half immediately. The large unicorn horn of the statue bashed into his chest and the weight of the statue knocked him off his feet.

Now was the time I wish I would have thought out the consequences. As the statue hit the ground, the ground too gave way. A crater formed, a sinkhole in the middle. It dragged the pedestal I lay upon on with it. I didn't have the strength or the traction to stop myself from rolling down the incline. It dropped flung me off from my vantage point and deposited me on the ground with another thud. This landing wasn't as gentle as the last. I think a fracture might have turned into a break because of that one.

Rumbling and cracking stone drowned out my cries of pain. Luckily, the old floor did not give way and break through to the lower levels of the Keep. Regardless, the destruction had been near total. Dozens of pieces of precious art, statues hundreds of years old were destroyed and deposited in heaps. I rode out the last few moments of the destruction and watched the dust begin to settle.

My face pressed hard against the floor and I had enough strength to crawl on all fours and fall over backwards against the wall. The entire floor had been leveled. I could trace a direct path back up to the second level from here. But my strength had left me. My legs could not lift me and I couldn't carry myself there to escape. My right shoulder all the way to the tip of the middle finger went numb with pain. I could feel my knees creak and crack with every bit of movement. A trickle of blood oozed from my chest wound which had reopened in a few spots. A fresh would from my forehead poured a new tributary of blood over my left eye.

Yet the scene trough my right eye made it worthwhile. I spied Nerick laying flat on his back in the center of the shallow crater. The equestrian statue had broken into many pieces, but the horse's head and a good part of its body along with rider's torso had landed directly on top of him. A spine of stone sunk deep into the center of his breastplate and the man's limbs were sprawled lifelessly to the four cardinal directions.

I could feel my breathing steady and the last IV drops of adrenaline pouring into my blood vessels dry up. My body went limp and I prepared to nod off right then and there.

Thump. Came one noise from the last place I wanted to anything from. It echoed throughout the room as if to mock me. Followed it were sounds which could be likened to gusts of wind. A desperate gasp and heave caused the statue, turned tombstone, to shudder. It rose a few centimeters high and stayed there for a few seconds.

Nerick's legs and arms began to spasm. A horrifying thing to witness. A black ichor oozed its way through the veins in his bare arms and I watched it through the parts of his legs I could see through his shredded clothes. It's a hideous display, but it wasn't his death throes I watched. His arms came back to life and violently seized the spike driven into the middle of his chest. He tried to pull it out, but failed to muster the leverage do so.

So he opted to batter and brutalize the stone itself. The statue crumbled into pieces on top of him from the flurry of desperate blows. Meanwhile, I sat there helpless to stop him. I couldn't move either.

A fresh cloud of dust washed over the room and a couple lungs full of it caused my chest to painfully spasm into a coughing fit. As it settled I saw the so called adventurer rise to his feet. He looked more like a puppet being pulled up by a couple strings still attached. His feet were not steady on the ground, but her managed it.

Nerick turned toward me and I saw the spike of stone still jutting out. It had broken off in the destruction, yet the thing had buried itself so deep that it has held on tenaciously. He clawed at his chest, but could not remove it. It caused him a great deal of pain, so much that he frantically tore apart the leather straps and strings holding his breast plate together. Not only is there a spike sticking into it, the whole thing had dented inward... But not as much as it should have.

He tore the metal from his chest and threw it to the side. My eyes glanced over and saw the most miniscule amount of stone had punctured through to the other side. Now free from the crushing pressure of his mutilated breastplate, the man could once again breathe freely. Or he would have, but a crinkling of bones and fractured ribs caused him pain and he could do nothing else but take in many short gasps for breath. It appeared as if he were hyperventilating.

And so then he turned his attention to me at last. His eyes were as bloodshot as ever, but clear and focused anew. His scarred skin had turned black in places. Arteries bulged across his face, neck and the rest of his body. They were neither red nor blue. It's a pitch black. A smokey pitch black. That pipe was firmly secured between his teeth and he sucked in its narcotic effects as if he needed it more than oxygen.

His first step toward me were accompanied by sick squelches of muscles which had been reduced to mush. A walking pile of hamburger meat. A leg bent in the wrong direction which lagged behind him, but somehow manged to carry him closer with short and careful steps. A psychotic glint in his eyes struck me with a primal fear. They were completely black. His eyes had had taken on the pitch black color of smoke.

“A record,” his voice croaked, raspy and unrecognizable.

“But I've put myself back together from stuff almost as bad.”

His boast put all those scars across body into a new light. They were not injuries from a life of fighting. They were the result of being put back together.

Suspended by an invisible string, the man's mutilated arm patted his bare chest. His arm dangled lifelessly; split in many places. The overstressed muscles had ruptured after being pushed beyond their intended limits. Everything about him looked broken. There were two things which didn't currently appear beyond repair. Those were his skull and spine. Both managed to somehow maintain their integrity.

But it's the old scar on his chest which concerned him most of all. The condition the rest of his body was in didn't faze him at all. His attention turned to fostering a renewed appreciation for the thick mound of scar tissue on his chest

“Hehehe,” he snorted and then broke out into a roaring laughter without care for his brutalized smoker's lungs. “HA HA HA HA! Ain't that something. I can feel the bone in pieces, but it quite go deep enough to hit my heart. How about that?”

His black eyes flared with sinister glee.

“I guess I should thank the whore for once, eh? HA HA HA!”

Nerick held the steel head of his axe in the other hand. He didn't seem to mind that nearly the entirety of the haft had snapped off and vanished somewhere. All he cared about was taking one slow and careful step at a time toward me.

“But the Master said that tin can would save my life someday. He's got this kind of prophetic knack to him about things like this.”

I couldn't drag myself off the floor. My body sat there with my back against the cold stone. Frozen blood through terror and exhaustion overtook me.

“That takes me back... Yeah that's right... I'll have to thank him again. But first, I'll deal with you. That can be my gift to him. I almost forgot all about it. He didn't talk about it much. Only when you got him good and drunk enough... Yeah... This'll make the girl disappear. She'll not matter any longer after that. That'll settle some of his unfinished business, once and for all. He'll promote me again for

sure. We'll travel together again. He acted like a father I never had, you see? All this pain. That ain't nothing for a reward like that."

He lumbered ever closer until he stood over me. The limp hand with the bloody axe head swung like a pendulum with each graceless step he took. Nerick loomed over me and I could do nothing to stop him. I had no one to pray to. I could do nothing but offer apologies to those not present. The axe head slowly rose up by that unseen string. It'd be a painful, but weak blow. It would no doubt take many to hack me until I died. There's no guarantee the first one, even if it hit me square on the head, would kill me immediately.

That likely did not bother Nerick at all. His twisted smile conveyed that he'd enjoy taking payment for his suffering with a single pound of flesh at a time. I closed my eyes and waited for the guillotine to fall.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

A strange noise from a strange place.

"Very good. An excellent show," came the dry monotonous voice.

I fresh wave of terror struck me. But with the present terror at hand, their mingling left a profound state of confusion thumping inside my chest and skull. A slow and steady golf clap presided over the ghostly quiet approach of the newcomer.

A gaunt and gangly man casually strutted down the stairs nearby with a slouched gait. His curved spine hide away behind a long white cloak which looked remarkably similar to a traditional lab coat. His bald head is eerily sterile. It capped a face which looked so generic that you'd achieve it by hitting default on all options for a video game character creator. But all that combined somehow into a unique man known as Vee.

"Vee," Nerick growled. He lowered the axe and lost interest in me for the time being. "How did you get in here?"

"Oh, I was always here," he spoke, irritatingly uninterested. "I studied this place a few days ago and found nothing of any immediate interest... But I knew I merely lacked the key to its secrets and had to wait for the absent party to make their move."

"Yeah, and you keep waiting. Forever. Stay out of my way!"

Nerick hissed and turned back to me and readied the axe head once more.

“I'm afraid I cannot let you, good sir.”

Nerick pulled back again and this time turned his back to me. Vee had reached the middle step of the stairs leading to this level. He stopped there and studied the broken warrior. As improbable as Nerick's condition was, the mad scientist character seemed disinterested.

“Come again?” Nerick said with a hint of a chuckle.

“I believe this little spat of yours is over. Now. That means your business is concluded. I still have some things I must discuss with Mr. Laven.”

His eyes turned to me. That little twist in his otherwise emotionless face filled me with unease. It filled Nerick with anger.

“Piss off, you stringy worm! This ain't over till the finishing blow!”

“When our business is concluded, and when I see no reason for any subsequent meeting at a future date, I will extend that honor upon you. But for now I'll have to ask you to wait your turn.”

Nerick became so overcome with anger that he couldn't speak another word. The sheer audacity of Vee's sudden appearance and his choice of words overwhelmed his already stressed mental state.

“I believe the rules of fair combat are quite clear. They declare, by virtue of all rules I am aware of, that it is Mr. Laven's victory. You, with all your magical enhancements, equipment and performance enhancing narcotics, has left you in such a state. I would motion, as a third party observer, that at the disadvantages that Laven entered the fight with, he has triumphed. Now. I shall repeat myself once more: Stand aside and wait your turn.”

Nerick nearly forgot I sat helplessly on the floor in front of him. He could have so easily ignored Vee, but took the bait hook line an sinker. He hobbled a few steps toward Vee while brandishing the head of his axe.

“Even like this, you rotten stringy worm, I could snap you in two. I could tear out your entrails and make you count the segments in

your intestine till the last second of your wretched life."

"I am sure you could," Vee agreed and sighed.

"I don't see that freak of a pet with you," Nerick menaced as he hobbled another couple steps forward.

"I have Patches preoccupied with other work. More important than her serving in any bodyguard capacity at this moment in time."

"A big mistake. You're a smart guy, so you should know all about everiron."

"I've dabbled in trying to replicate it some years ago, yes."

"Then you know there's nowhere far enough away that you can carry that scrawny ass of yours," Nerick said as he approached the bottom of the stairs.

Vee slowly raised his limp right arm up and pointed it toward Nerick. The brute stopped to get a couple pained laughs out.

"What? You gonna tickle me to death? Breena already told me that you aren't a threat. You ain't got a lick of magic to wiggle your fingers for."

"It is a sensation which may resemble tickling, yes—" Vee said as his left arm reached over to his right forearm.

Nerick stood idly by and watched with amusement at the lanky man's antics. He obviously did not feel threatened. There wasn't a single reaction from him until Vee grabbed hold of something hidden underneath his sleeve which gave out a sound reminiscent of a cocking shotgun. A distinctively and unmistakable buzzing sound grew louder.

"—But that is reserved for limited exposure at low levels."

Vee clenched his limp fingers into a tight fist and a small pop cracked through the air. A pair of small metal darts streaked through the air and made contact with Nerick's neck. Following shortly after were a pair of copper wires which made metallic whip-cracks as vibrated. It didn't appear to cause much damage. Neither did it look like it hurt much at all. The two darts were no bigger than sewing pins. What grabbed my attention was the pair of wires danging between the

darts and Vee's wrist.

“Remember: I asked you nicely,” Vee said with an empty smile.

A flash split the air. A bolt of lightning jumped down the wire and surged into Nerick through the embded needles. The Bannerman hadn't been quick enough and his whole body convulsed as the lightning raced all over his body. He screamed bloody murder. The wooden pipe grit between his teeth split in two and then erupted into flames. It reduced to ash and blew away. Nerick's knees buckled and he fell to the floor in a heap. Without the source of his painkiller, the full force of the lightning caused every remaining nerve in his body to scream in agony.

The scent of burning flesh filled the room. It accompanied all the screaming. I didn't have a good view of it, thank god, but I could see Vee's expression. He wore a frown on his face, the first I ever recall seeing. There is something disdainful about it. It wasn't a remorseful expression. It felt more like one you saved for crushing a bug.

Nerick's screams lasted for quite some time. Yet the lightening strike refused to relent. Eventually it would be the man on the floor who would cease moving before the lightning expired. He lay in a heap on the floor. No longer a heap of hamburger held together by willpower and string, but a blackened mummified corpse of charred human flesh.

Vee twisted his forearm and that summoned the darts back. A winch whined inside the contraption hidden behind his sleeve and pulled it back without fanfare. The wires pulled the darts back underneath that sleeve and he cocked the mechanism a second time. Flying out from underneath was a tiny glass container the size of a small light-bulb. It pinged off the ground and bounced its way down before reaching the floor and slowly rolling its way toward me.

It came to rest nearby. I watched as a stray flicker of lightning escaped and a weak ball of pure electricity still within it fade away into nothing. Just as quickly as the final moments o the lightning end, the glass disintegrated back into sand and the metal screw and foot contact corroded into grains of rust.

Then Vee turned his eyes toward me. That same creepy smile spread across his face, the same one from the ball. I glared back at him with the bravest face I could muster, but I couldn't pull myself off

the floor. He descended the final steps, lunged over the body of Nerick and then casually strolled his way over to me.

“Not so fast, Mr. Laven. You shouldn't overexert yourself,” he said monotonously, but with what almost sounded like a hint of concern.

“What do you want?” I spat.

Of all the things he could be interested in... My hand reached for the bag at my waist. The green crystalline key. I felt it through the bag and felt a momentary sensation of relief that it seemed intact after all that.

“Calm yourself, Mr. Laven. I don't want anything from you.”

I threw back at him the finest skeptical eyes I could muster. He saw the defiance on my face, but continued unfazed.

“Rather... It is something I want you to do.”

I didn't need to ask the obvious question. He continued as if I had already asked.

“I'm here for not other reason than observe. And to make sure you do exactly what you intended from the start.”

Chapter 101

Chaos reigned beneath the glow of a new dawn. Two armies clashed once again for the third day in a row. Missiles flew, stones hurled across the sky and curses were thrown. Men clambered about at the base of the walls with ladders and ramps. Duke Malco's citadel, Sulunaerg, desperately fended off a force many times their own. Several thousand of Count Aaron's men—a majority of them mercenaries— laid siege and assaulted the walls relentlessly.

To the Duke's credit, and the dismay of the Count's men, the castle was well garrisoned. Malco had rallied twenty of his knights to his side. With them came their own retainers. Yet that meant there was just short of five-hundred men to garrison the castle. Everyone from servants, chefs to squires took up arms and shared shifts at the ramparts. They steeled their resolve as they watched ten times that number surround the castle and nearby countryside.

Sulunaerg —Death's End— crowned a hill which had but one slope. All other sides were sheer cliffs. Laying in the castle's shadow on the opposite side was Yaleria's capital, Mornurg. She had fallen on the first day and been promptly looted. Wooden structures were in the process of being violently disassembled to construct makeshift equipment to assail the citadel's walls.

Duke Malco stood atop the battlements adorned with his plate armor and wielding a mighty two-handed sword, Halazuel. So heavy was it that he only need drop it on the men about to peak their heads over the ramparts to split their helmets in two. His men cheered him on as he roared defiantly with every man he sent flying back to the ground. His howls and litany of crude insults reinforced the name de guerre, the Midnight Wolf. Malco completed the image with a mane of savagely disheveled night colored hair and cloak of wold pelts. A pair of fury filled hazel eyes stabbed into the hearts of his opponents. He kept the visor of his helm lifted and his men could spot him from a mile away due to the wolf pelt cloak billowing behind him.

“My lord” A knight with his arm in a sling shouted as he threw himself up the stairs to the rampart. “They're approaching with the ram again!”

Malco clicked his tongue as he surveyed the situation at the main gate.

“Get all those with the back and knees for it onto chiseling

out more stones."

He turned his attention to a page who was busy collecting and dumping bundles of retrieved arrows like firewood at the feet of the archers positioned along the walls. They had already used up their own supplies rebutting the vicious onslaught on the second day.

"Boy! Run down to the cellar and get me an update on those listening for sappers. I haven't heard from them since midnight!"

Count Aaron's coin cast a net that went far and wide. A great deal of expertise had concentrated itself on his quaint little fortress. Reports told of specialized climbing equipment with mountain men advisers and dwarven miners readying their tools at Mornurg.

"Are you certain we shouldn't fall back to the keep?" One of Malco's knight's advised, his voice nearly drowned out by the melee.

The walls of the keep were much higher than those of the bailey. Malco's man eyed the steep and fortified motte and thought they could hold out there for far longer.

"And give them a position on the hill? If we let them establish their camp on the first level, the keep wont hold for long!"

And while retreating to the keep would be easier to defend with so few men, the fact remained that there was very little room for the enemy to maneuver below the walls of the bailey. They could position their ladders and drag a ram up the path, but nothing like a tower. A gaggle of siege engines at the base of the hill were nearing completion too. There was the mustering yards on the first level and then there was the bottom of the hill. Furthermore, the path exhausted the men as they climbed the steps to join the battle. They fought tired and exhausted men while they fought in leisure.

Malco knew he had no other option than to prolong the siege. He could not outlast it. Nor could he defeat it. All were impossible. Sulunaerg, built centuries ago by his forefathers, was not designed to last like others. It served as a lookout. The true line of defense was the Brightwall on the horizon.

Count Aaron's men had seized it with a dirty ploy three days ago. Then he sacked it and drug out all of its supplies. Within it were aquifers for an inexhaustible well of clean water. There were also previsions for more than a year. Its armories had more than Yaleria could ever use within a decade. Aaron afforded the wages of another

thousand men on the savings alone through that plunder.

The only hope for Malco was that Count Aaron's treachery violated Imperial law. His majesty the Emperor, nor any the nobles on his ruling council, would recognize this act of aggression. Malco need only hold onto the last fistful of soil he could until an Imperial edict reached them. A fleet of carrier pigeons had been let loose and the Count could not have hoped to stop them all. Once the message of distress got received an summons for the Count would soon follow. He'd be commanded to Perrsolis and face and face justice.

Yet Malco was not naive enough to think the Empire would protest if it were only Count Aaron alive when his envoys arrived. Such is the sad state the Empire was in. So long as Yaleria fulfilled its duty, the land remained alower priority than the multitude of blood feuds and civil war looming elsewhere. The Empire would care for little else than the Brightwall's integrity and its contents safely sealed away.

With that thought deeply entrenched in his mind, the Duke swung the mighty sword of his down once more. A mighty roar emptied his lungs as he cleaved the top off the sturdy hardwood ladder in twain. It lost its integrity and splintered into bits which sent the next men scaling it back to the hard rocky cliffside.

But Malco's bravado could not go unrewarded forever. A stray arrow pierced through the pauldron protecting his right shoulder. It sapped the strength from his arm and Halazuel's tip fell and dug into the stone. The force of the longbow arrow forced him to spin around completely. Only by keeping his feet firmly planted on the castle wall's scaffolding, the man's bulk was prevented from reeling out of control.

A scrum erupts as several of the Duke's loyal men shout in pain and rage and converge on the spot along the wall. They throw themselves to the front line where their liege had been before and desperately fight to drive off the emboldened mercenaries scaling the walls.

Malso protests and tries to shake the men off of him, so that he might rejoin the fight, but a torrent of blood has begun flowing down his arm and oozing out from between the chain links in his undercoat. Neither did he have the strength or control in his right arm to struggle. Three of his knights pulled the injured Duke inside the nearest tower. The three men tried to strip the armor off, but the flailing of the Duke prevented them from dressing his wound.

But as quickly as the knights had carried him inside, the men suddenly decided to leave all at once and return to the battle. Their quick departure managed to strike the furious Duke. That's when he noticed the sound of battle grew increasingly distant. A chill spread throughout his body and a primal terror filled his heart.

Your body is dying. That is what the Duke thought. His limbs grew numb and a hot pulsing pinched the nerves around the arrow wound. An artery must have been ruptured if he was fading out so fast and his vision became like that of a drunkard. He suffered through the sting as the hot poker sensation in his shoulder was suddenly replaced with an icy chill.

Terror gave way to bewilderment when he saw clouds of white puff forth in front of his face with every pained huff. His red blood had turned black and the sensation of pain turned quickly to a biting cold before it vanished altogether. Malco clawed at his right should with his left hand, but did not feel the arrow there at all.

“Looking for this?” A woman's sensual voice cooed behind him.

The Duke's wide eyes swung to the voice's origin and he saw a pale woman sitting leisurely on a wooden crate behind him. She playfully kicked her feet while tumbling the arrow between her fingers. No, to call them her fingers would be a grave misunderstanding. She tumbled them over the knuckles of a large ethereal claw which wreathed her real petite and pearl white She grew quickly tired of the bloodstained arrow and incinerated it; her ghostly claws disintegrated and did not leave so much as ashes behind.

“You—” Malco seethed.

A pair of blood red irises and eerily white pupils greeted Malco's furious glare.

“The one and only. Hekati Fioina Hyria, Princess of Yaleria... At your service,” she said and sealed it with a seductress' smile.

“Don't you dare sully this land with that odious claim of yours,” Malco spat.

His body convulsed as he tried to peel himself off the frostbit stone. A pain not unlike the bite of steel throbbed from his shoulder and cut the strength out from his knees.

“My my,” Hyria said whilst coquettishly raising a hand to her cheek, “Don't go and try running around so soon. You'll need to give that would a few more minutes to heal.”

Malco was now privy to the painful sensation of frostbite seizing his wounded shoulder. It burned with all the same pain as moonshine poured into an open cut. Yet as time passed, the warm feeling of a spring thaw worked its magic to bring the shattered bone back together and cauterize the ripped muscle and flayed skin.

Malco grit his teeth and bore the pain yet he could withhold his anger, “No one asked for your help, witch.”

“I do not give help,” Hyria replied. “You make it sound as though I expect something in return. No. This is an act of love.”

Hyria raised the back of her hand to her forehead dramatically and leaned back in an exaggerated act of theater. Her whimsical voice was layered thin atop a stifled giggle. The good duke showcased the exact opposite. This time he forced himself back onto his feet, but a claw gripped his whole torso and slammed him back down onto the floor.

“I said you'll need to give that wound a few minutes more,” Hyria commanded with a stern voice.

Her strength was unholy, the man could not fight back as she pinned him to the floor with one arm. Malco eyed Halazuel laying on the floor, but it was beyond his reach. Not that he had the strength to deal a fatal blow, even if the heirloom could cause the undead to experience pain they would otherwise remain oblivious to. Neither did he rage and curse, the man appeared as though this kind of exchange was not at all unfamiliar.

Hyria straddled the nobleman and locked her knees tightly against the plate and mail securely fastened to his sides. Her slender fingers were pressed firmly against the breastplate while the ghostly and monstrously sized claw shrouding it drove holes into the stone like rail spikes. Malco glared up at the woman with hate filled eyes, but he remained unflustered. A miraculous feat considering the woman's curves and seductive gaze.

“I placed an enchantment on the entryway,” Hyria said as she drew circles on Malco's chest with her finger. “No one is going to wander in.”

“Get off of me,” he said at last, his every word dripping with acidic venom.

Hyria laughed, “I can read the mood. My love this day goes beyond this tender loving care.”

“And when did your meddling ever do anything but cause me misery?”

Hyria's mirthful expression melted off her face.

“I don't expect you to understand, but I do expect you will see it with your own eyes soon enough.”

“You've had from my earliest memories to these which may be my last,” Malco said and flared his teeth in anger. “You've done nothing but haunt and torment me.”

“And who was it that caught that young boy when he foolishly climbed the ramparts on his own?” Hyria replied with a hint of incredulity. “Who graced your mother with the luck to find the exact herbs needed to treat that boy's pox the very next year? Which specter watched him grow and kept him safe from the wolves on his boar hunts?”

“... I'd have been married long ago.”

“None so fine as me,” Hyria said with a smile.

There were rumors, whispered in confidence only where the walls had no ears, that Malco may have been a sodomite. All the young and nubile supplicants fled from the household with faces stricken white with fear and a bevy of poor excuses. Hyria had hounded Malco's love life with endless fits of jealously ever since he was a boy. Yet that paled in comparison to the core of the Duke's hatred of the wight.

“And who couldn't be bothered to spare the lives of that boy's own parents? Who drove every woman from this castle in a fit of jealousy? Which specter was it that watched that boy's sister wither away and die without so much as lifting a finger?!”

Hyria's expression twisted with pain. A dark cloud had descended across her radiant full-moon smile. Stone crumbled as she pulled her claws free from the floor. She pulled herself free from the embrace and walked unsteadily toward the arrow-slit window. Malco

watched the orange glow of dawn splash against her pale white skin. Under the moonlight it shone like a gem atop a pristine still-water lake. Forced to weather the sun, it made her look sickly and gaunt. The red glow which hid much power behind it waned and her eyes became gray with unnatural points of ivory white within.

“Those were beyond my control,” Hyria said, joy vacant from her words.

“Don't lie to me,” Malco said as he rose to his feet.

Strength returned to him and Hyria dared not intervene this time. The wound had already healed over and the frost left behind by the wight's magic had faded away. She did not stir as the Duke retrieved the two-handed sword off the floor. Yet despite the anger woven betwixt each word, the man did not raise it. Malco let the tip sit calmly against the floor as he lifted the hilt up to his waist.

“Don't think of me as ignorant. You may see the future, but that doesn't make you are a god and I am not.”

“Ignorant? No. But perhaps a fool if you understood that much. Nonetheless, you accepted that challenge all those years ago.”

Secured within the Duke's private chamber was a table with a chessboard. Its pieces waited in suspended animation for the game to continue. The time between each move had reached months at time, but the ivory and ebony pieces suffered the grinding oppression of time and caked layers of dust like the soldiers they were.

They represented a struggle between the two. A duel in a stalemate as a battle waged beyond the safety of the tower's walls. Ivory embodied a man who prided himself on his martial prowess and keen tactical mind, both carved into him by his father and his father before him. A blood right which reached back over two thousand years. The ebony pieces represented the supernatural gift and guile of a soul which refused to depart. A woman who could see the future as clearly as ships traveling on the horizon or clouds as they billow and morph across the sky.

In the end, the activity spiraled toward futility. White was destined to lose. Black wanted nothing more than to win. The game's wager was for the loser to fulfill the one wish of the victor. One wished for the other to banish themselves, never to return. Another wished for acceptance.

“You think our lives are ruled over by fate and everything is determined. I aimed to prove you wrong,” Malco said defiantly.

“I find it amusing to hear that from a man who claims that it is by blood that men should rule,” retorted. “If only you had been more forthcoming with your true feelings. Did you truly need to wait until the end to confide in me?”

Malco pursed his lips together and glared back at the undead princess with nigh murderous eyes.

“Did I not mention it before? Seeing the future and changing it are separate endeavors. Yes, I saw the death of your parents. I also witnessed the day of your grandfather's death, in the comfort of his bed, months before it came to pass. So too did I dream of his father before him; the mortal wound he would receive in a tournament. Could I have changed either? Can one change the course of a river by dropping a boulder large enough in its path? No, the river's flow will not be so easily stopped... This was also true of your sister.”

“Liar!” Malco roared.

“She was born weak and sickly. The poor girl was never meant to last. Beautiful, but transient.”

“Lies!” Malco screamed and his hand on the hilt of his sword twitched.

“Had I told you of it, you may have nursed her, but do you think the Count, her future husband, would have heeded my council?”

Malco nearly bit his tongue as he reeled back.

“Would those final moments with that man have been better than when they were spent with you instead?”

Malco's rage wavered as his eyes sunk to the ground between his feet. The grip on his sword slackened and the tension in his sword arm relaxed completely.

“A game of chess is a closed system with restrictive rules. There is a near infinite yet limited actions one may take. Foreseeing the one you take is child's play. In life there are so many possibilities, so much choice and free will, that altering one event can have disastrous consequences or be in vain to affect an ultimate outcome.”

“Then why are you even here?” Malco's meek voice asked.

“To do what I can. Choosing another outcome this day is beyond me. I despaired for years of this day. Knowing it would come to pass. You too knew it would as well. Yet you did not have the proof nor justification to stop the Count before he was ready to strike. Neither did he fall to any of your traps... But I have put into motion another actor.”

Hyria turned and faced Malco. Her somber expression melted and gave way to a somber smile.

“Something in the fortunes changed. What seemed certain this day was suddenly thrown into chaos. An unexpected variable revealed itself. Nothing heralded its arrival. I could not have foreseen it. Nearly two months ago to this day, the man materialized as if from the aether itself.”

A shift in the shouting outside occurred. Battle cries, screams of pain, taunts and curses gave way to cheering. Malco's eyes twitched and his heart fluttered. They were voices he knew which had gathered into a chorus. Hyria extended her arm toward the door and invited the duke to go see what had occurred with his own eyes. He looked toward the doorway, but when he looked back toward the princess, she had already vanished.

When Malco stepped past the threshold, the spell which had subconsciously barred his fellows from intruding on himself and Hyria shattered. A knight errant stumbled toward him and grabbed hold of the Malco by the shoulders. He could not contain his excitement.

“Sir! The Count's flag has been thrown from the Brightkeep gates!”

Malco was not sure how to begin processing that information. Neither could those currently assailing his castle's walls. His began celebrating and raising their weapons into the air. Taunts followed retreat of the Count's men. They were forced to withdraw and regroup back at the forward siege camp while being harried by a hail of arrows and slings.

Another lesser knight ran up to the duke and thrust a spyglass into his hands. Given the circumstances, the nobleman chose to ignore the uncouth act from a man of lower status. Through it he saw for himself his family colors flying on the horizon. The Count's banners had been tossed from the ramparts above the gatehouse of the Brightkeep.

A smolder of hope burned in the cockles of his heart. Without access to the Brightkeep, the count's logistics would be severely compromised. He would need to spread his forces thinner to forage and loot elsewhere. Such desperation and barbarity would leave him susceptible to his own non-levied loyalists throughout Yaleria. That may buy the time necessary for an Imperial envoy to arrive.

He could never have known what else this turn of fortune would buy time for.

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I thought days spent in the swamps of Yaleria would have deadened me to the scent of death, but I underestimated that fearful force of nature. Being immersed in the stench of rot left me ill prepared for the disturbing sensation of burnt flesh and hair which assaulted me. My body sat here paralyzed by fatigue, blood loss and fractured bone. I suppose I could be doing worse. My body coursing with lactic acid could be that black husk in front of me which had once been a man.

Vee stepped over the remains of Nerick as if it were nothing but a turd left in the middle of a park path. His face, the very definition of the uncanny valley, gleamed with a smile that simply didn't belong. A wide toothless crescent of the lips was slapped onto a face. It's so unremarkable that you'd be hard pressed to describe it properly to the best facial composite expert. I began to have my suspicions he may have somehow, for some reason, mutilated himself to achieve this very end.

I wouldn't put it beyond the typical fanfare of secret societies and nutbars.

The noontime sun began to shine through the stained glass windows above which painted the chrome dome of his with a kaleidoscope of colors. Everywhere else the true extent of the damage caused by Nerick and I's fight became apparent. Vee navigated the shattered remains and parked himself about eight meters away, the very limit of my currently strained comfort zone. He gave one very polite, deep and gracious bow.

“Professor Vee at your service, Mr. Laven,” the white lab coat clad man said as he slowly raised his head.

“A bit too hands on... for being a mere observer,” I muttered defiantly between coughing fits.

“You are the experimental variable, good sir. Intervention was necessary. Although I will admit I underestimated the resiliency of our dearly departed friend, Mr. Nerick.”

“Underestimated? When did you ever estimate—”

I stopped dead in my tracks as the realization hit me. My intuition leaped up and struck another blow right in the chest.

“You son of a bitch,” I cursed through grinding teeth.

“As quick on the uptake as I had hoped for,” Vee said with that sickening smile. “This gives me hope that our conversation will be both fruitful and expedient.”

“You're the one who told Nerick to be here... But how? How could you have possibly known—”

“A simple deduction with the correct data,” Vee said in a very matter of fact manner. “Allow me to elucidate. You've taken great pains to minimize your movement and activities since we last met, but you did leave behind one very important clue. After Prince Deron's demise, and shortly before I took on Count Aaron's contract, I was struck with an insatiable curiosity.”

And here I thought the man said he wanted to be brief. Now he began pacing back and forth in front of me. It's very irritating. It stung like hell to move my neck. Even my eyes felt sore.

“I returned to what you may say was 'the scene of the crime'. What I found in the ruins of my laboratory in the Prince's stronghold challenged every preconceived notion I've taken for granted in all my years of research.”

Vee stopped. He slowly turned his gaze back upon me and my stomach churned at the sight of a pair of fish wide eyes plastered above his smile.

“I combed over the combat data of my Mk. V and could hardly believe my own eyes. Its power core had been torn free of its chest. What more, by your very own hands. Your very own bare hands.”

The Mk. V. My memory filled with visions of that Talos sized living suit of armor. That ten foot tall monstrosity that Chris and I

battled with. Remembering that this man built that thing which was in a long series of things which has almost killed me of the past two months did not help my blood pressure which continued to elevate every passing second I had to look at the man.

"I could not make sense of the numbers any other way — you— by your own hands came into contact with pure abyssal energy... And survived. After that, I knew I simply had to meet you once more."

"What do you mean by pure?" I asked.

"A short lived state of all abyssal energy. Surely you saw the results of my experiments back in Domdracveria. The Mk. III's and IV's. I attempted to create an interface between the material and abyssal energy. A type of golem, if you will. Yet not long after completion and activation, the forms changed into that of shapely and beautiful women. They became living suits of armor. Inhabited by cursed and lustful ghosts. It took a great deal of effort to keep their consciousnesses subdued. We lost a few, and some of Deron's men, when they assaulted them. Had to put a dozen or so pairs down."

My face scrunched up in anger at the very thought of what came out of his mouth. I had a personal grudge against the Prince since he nearly caved my chest in with a mace and threw me down some stairs, but what I just heard made my lingering hatred primal. That extended to Vee as well, the callousness of his words...

"That, my good sir, is the intervention of the Monster Lord. She, the being who has nigh complete jurisdiction over abyssal energy. And such a licentious being has deigned for all abyssal energy to serve that single-minded purpose. I've spent nearly all my life studying it."

"And you want to control it for yourself," I said.

"Control? A poor choice of words. I do not doubt my various clients have been seduced by the idea, but I am merely a philosopher, and alchemist. I desire only to understand. To learn. After all, gods no longer walk among us. The closest to creation man will ever achieve shall be found in its sister."

"What the hell are you—"

"Let there be light; and there was light. They saw that the light was good; and so the gods separated the light from the darkness.

Well, my friend, the abyss is but another type of light. That the Monster Lord, given power over it, can create a world all her own should stand as a testament to that."

A raving madman. It may be because of the pain, probably the anger mostly, but I couldn't make sense of anything he said.

I could not hide my contempt when I barked back, "Friend? A little speech and running off in order to leave me with your machine of death hardly seems to be a first meeting."

"An unfortunate encounter. Purely business. I hope as a contractor yourself that you we can reconcile a professional reset in our relations."

"I doubt it."

"Doubt is healthy. It shows flexibility and room for inquiry and growth," Vee said and show glinting teeth of an expanding smile.

Well, it seems I'll have to put aside sarcasm for remainder of this conversation.

"I've been studying abyssal energy for three decades, ever since my apprenticeship under my old mentor. It has been an off and on project. For you see, it requires a substantial investment of resources and capital."

"And contractor work in making a good ol' war machine does better than the alternatives?" I quipped. "You talk about creation, and you've never made it past the destroying part."

"Precisely. It is not as theoretical or far reaching in utility as I would prefer, but men such as myself have little other recourse. Such are the times," he sighed. "Oh, to be born too late for the golden age of the Empire, but live so far ahead of my times that I must struggle through the dark out of the Church's sight. A true man of natural philosophy lament."

"Yeah, what a shame. But that doesn't answer my question."

Hmm, yes I suppose it does not," Vee's smile faded away, thankfully, as he descended deep into pensive thought. "I should correct my earlier statement, however. It's not through you, or the data you left behind. Rather, it was one of your companions."

My heart thumped violently in my chest. My train of thought was obliterated and the contents thrown up into the air to settle back down where they please. In what pattern? Vee would soon elucidate.

“In the Royal Libraries of Zern, the dust had been disturbed. Certain indexes accessed. You and your companions accessed those hallowed grounds as part of your fee for assisting the Violetta loyalists during their civil war. Very peculiar, the selection was. Many were historical. Not too surprising for a being out of time and space. It would be a jarring change from the fourth age immediately into the sixth... But it was those documenting the archeological finds of The Third which interested me.”

Susan spent a little more than a week going through that library, that's true. A sense of relief washed over me that no one I knew, or cared about, ratted me out to this incarnation of autistic ghoulishness. That concern was replaced by the glaring oversight in our attempts to cover our tracks.

But those concerns did not press down on me as heavily as the confusion of talking about ages. He wasn't talking about how old those books were. Nor was he talking about the age of things which those books talked about.

“Third age of what?”

“The third age,” Vee said, complete with a tinge of disappointment that I had to ask a question to receive an answer he suspected was obvious. “Do you mean to tell me you don't know?”

Answering that honestly would put me in a bad spot. I was already on my ass, motionless and paralyzed. I didn't need to make that worse by undercutting myself in terms of status as it relates to knowledge. That would be giving up the last card I had.

“A rhetorical question,” I replied with sweat pooling on my forehead.

Vee stared at me blankly, but blinked twice and continued as if he had never been interrupted at all.

“An ancient temple complex long across the southern sea, behind the great white cliffs of Xerez and beyond countless leagues of jungle and marsh tributaries. Not since the late Karl Galowtiz's Great south exploration expedition five centuries prior has this place been recorded by man... For it is Amazonian territory now. Nothing short of

an ultimately doomed crusade could reach its stone steps."

Those were the pyramids which held the constellation maps. They were eerily exact, a perfect replica to the heavens back home. There was no way it could be a mere coincidence. But I couldn't begin to imagine what he found so interesting.

"As impressive as they were, the mountains of stone were but foundations to something larger," Vee made the claim with confidence. "A great tower. A mighty tower which scraped the sky. One of many. A Pillar of Babel."

"Babel? That Babel?" I gasped, then groaned as I forget myself after trying to stand up.

"Not that Babel, nor the Babel... I see... Perhaps I got ahead of myself. Scriptures do describe Babel as a single structure. That old story serves little historic significance. The moral is more important to The Church of the Almighty, and within the shrines and temples belonging to a myriad of religions past and present. You are familiar with the story, are you not?" Vee asked with a cocked eyebrow.

There were similarities between this world and my own, and this one was but another. On one count it would be the lingua franca which was identical to English in vernacular. Yet it wrote itself similar to old Norse runes. Certain places looked as though they had shunted off from ones I've read about before... Now it seemed that scripture might be the same but I could not know for sure until I asked.

"Mankind tries building a tower to heaven and is punished for it. The peoples of the world are shattered and begins the birth of nations," I recanted the brief Sunday school summery.

"Yes, that would be correct. Although, if you do not fear looking into past histories that many would wish were forgotten, the real story is much more stunning."

"And that's what Oroborus is about," I said with stab in the dark.

Vee's eyes lit up again.

"So you remember?"

"I doubt this has to do with your little Free Brewers club."

“Alchemists haven't always been seen in a favorable light.”

“Oroborous, the serpent eating its own tail.”

“To symbolize the never ending quest for knowledge. An answer to one question inevitably leads to the asking of another. A self defeating and self perpetuating endeavor. We are few, but our disciplines are varied. We rarely meet in person, but we exchange knowledge freely. Invitation only, I'm afraid. And only at the cost of your name.”

Which would mean that Vee—

“Yes. Membership is restricted and limited. I am V. My old name is of little importance. All you need know is that names have a great magic all of their own. To sacrifice it, to put it in the hands of others, there is no greater gesture of devotion to the cause of Oroborous... And that rogue members can have that name recall... And destroyed in a ritual, no matter where they hide, in the most horrific ways. But that, among others, is a story for later. What you need to know for now is that uur world has seen six ages. At first there was chaos. All children know this. And at Genesis that chaos was split into the light, and the darkness. And thus began the first age, Eden: Garden of the Gods.”

Yes. This was beginning to get a bit disturbing. These similarities were getting to be bit much. They are too coincidental.

“Next would be Canaan: Land of Gods and Men. But neither of those are of any importance,” Vee said dismissively.

I would have challenged him on how such auspiciously named eras of history would be brushed again, but he carried while I was busy coughing and swallowing another lung back down.

“And thus came the third. With it came a force none at all like Gods or nature,” he paused and slowly leveled his eyes one me and waited for me to answer.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and thought on it for a few seconds. There was only one thing which came to mind.

“Magic.”

“And so magic came to our world!” Vee nodded, pleased. “The Great Weaving. And lo, mankind was freed from the shackles of

the gods. A higher force at their beck and call. A means to turn will into power. And on those hallowed grounds, where magic manifested itself the strongest in our world, the people of Canaan turned their backs on the gods. Babel rose as monuments to the power of man. And the gods could do not but watch."

"But not forever," I muttered.

"No," Vee shook his head. "Have you ever heard how a little knowledge is a dangerous thing? So too does it apply to Babel. Yet the siren call could not be ignored. Babel became so strong that it unleashed the Abyss upon this world. Destruction came from below as monsterkind crossed the threshold that Babel created. Demonkind soon followed and Mankind was nearly destroyed. Such came the fourth age. The Sundering. Mankind divided, into the nations and races that populated the world. Divided, so that they may never again create another Babel. Because that is what the gods demanded and only by intervention of the gods had man been spared... And after throwing themselves onto the abandoned altars they had spurned in favor of their own marvels after all the wonders they created, they cast it all aside in their time of need. In return for a single miracle. They left behind the ability to control the weather, provide infinite energy, let life take hold and make it grow... To gain insight into far off lands."

My heart had been running a good ten beats per minute faster than normal. Now it started beating ten or fifteen beyond what was comfortable. I became aware of the taste of iron in my mouth. No doubt my eyes were bulging as my mouth was agape.

It couldn't be... Could it?

The strange sights of Yaleria came to mind. The Brightwall. That magic barrier separating a land of undeath. I held the key to this tower in my hands. A green crystal. To gain insight into far off lands, the constellations etched onto those notes from that faraway temple. A step beyond star gazing: gazing into alien skies... My minded wandered back North. At that giant gash in the earth. Let life take hold, he said. I remembered the river I dreamed of. There's that man I met there too. A kingdom which died when it lost its precious treasure... A blue gemstone...

Vee smiled wider and wider till it I could count every one of his teeth. An oppressive terror descended upon me. I began to feel that same primal fear when I caught sight of Vee back at the Count's ball.

“I offer my sincere apologies that you experienced any inconvenience this day on my account. But the opportunity to study one mechanism of immense power. It was part of a system powerful enough to bring Abyssal energy to this material plane... Perhaps it is the key needed to tame it? Naught but a theory, but one which must be pursued. Until now there has been no other means to bring it about. I daresay it needn't have been this difficult. If only you were not so overcome with irrational reluctance.”

I shook my head and drove away the daze. His comment struck me right in the nerve and I could not help but lash out.

“You tried to kill me!” I screamed, but sent myself into coughing fit

“As I said, merely business. Prince Deron made that decision I personally had no desire in seeing Mk. V end your life. How about we start anew and let bygones be bygones. After all, you did destroy it. I wont bore nor shock you on that unit's cost...”

Vee took my coughing and pained silence afterward as consent. He seemed obvious to the hate filled stare I shot back at him.

“In fact I could not be happier that you survived. I was overjoyed to see you in the flesh at the Count's ball... And when I heard of your meeting with the mystery lady after the ball... I absolutely knew this meeting had to be arranged... No matter the cost.”

“That doesn't explain how you knew we'd be here! And—”

Wait. How did he know about that meeting?

Vee could see it on my face this time. He grinned and answered with a smirk.

“The dead do not sleep and one can achieve much with the right assistance.”

That Frankenstein monster... I think he called her Patches. If it were undead like Hyria, then of course it wouldn't knock her out of commission as well.

“You had Patches spy on us,” I hissed.

“Correct. She told me what she heard... And about that crystal you exchanged,” he said pointing toward the bag sitting limp at

my waist.

"The Void crystal," I said while I —in vain— put myself between Vee and the bag.

"A key," Vee claimed. "A very dangerous key."

"Null magic," I said, reciting what had been mentioned to me earlier by Hyria and her lich.

"Direct contact by anything, living or dead, would result in destruction. It is as much anti-existence as it is anti-magic. However, if someone could manage to insert it into a particularly powerful magic seal..."

"It would be destroyed."

"And thereby unleash?"

He isn't suggesting?— He must be...

"A Pillar," I said with trembling lips.

Vee literally glowed with that creepy smile on his face.

"Precisely... And that is why I had to insure you did not fail. You appear to me as some sort of aberration. An unexpected exception to a rule that prevails over all life... And undead... But at the same time I had to make sure you came alone. So I had Nerick and his Bannerman bar the way. Everything worked out as per my calculations. Barring Nerick being within this Throne room, that is. I suppose he was more lucid than I gave him credit for. He must have sensed I had an interest in this room and staked it out. A glaring oversight on my part

Vee returned to pacing once again.

"An interesting specimen to be sure. All those years with a dependency on that weed and he had yet to go brain dead. Let alone use it to his advantage and perform great feats of strength... Oh, now I regret killing him. The things I could have learned from an autopsy... Oh well, such is life," he said and shrugged away the heinous words and actions of his once again.

I could never hope to remain so blasé. My anger boiled and spiller over.

“You risked the life of me, my friends, and all the others just so you could get us alone!?”

“Man to man,” Vee responded apathetic to my fury. “Had any, god's forbid all, of your companions been here, why, my safety would be at peril. Patches is currently indisposed and I would not stand a chance.”

“Says the man with bottled lightning!”

“Had you not so thoroughly destroyed Nerick's body, I doubt my tether would have hit its mark. Had he been much better, I could foresee a significant risk of him dislodging the pins after impact, or shortly after the initialization... So do not sell yourself short on your contributions today, Mr. Laven.”

“My job was to follow this through. You didn't need to butt in at all!”

“But will you?”

Vee's expression threw me for a loop. He was genuinely posing that question. I stumbled over my own anger and clammed up.

“I have my suspicions. Perhaps you will cease once you understand what is to transpire here. That is why I am here and here alone. I have meditated on this question all week. Every fiber of my being and every waking moment weighing the options and imagining the consequences... I have concluded that you must succeed.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You, your friends, and all your allies will not survive should you fail.”

He's being sincere. I could read that on his face... No... The man's being sincere the whole time. It's that this one moment seemed heavier than all the others so far. He knew something else that he wasn't telling me.

“Bannermen or no, come hell or high water, the girls and I along with the captured knights are going to hold this tower. When help arrives from the rest of the Brightwall, the Count's offensive will fail. It will become a stalemate. The Empire will catch wind of the aggression and—”

“When the Count hears of these troubles, and how dire his situation is, the man will step in himself... I am sure he would have preferred to choose when and how he takes the stage, but as you saw at the ball, the man has a thing for theater... But let us not worry about that for now. We have work to do. And fear not for we shall have some time for us to discuss many things, so long as we begin now.”

I think I figured out what Vee insinuated. There's nothing else to do than ask him directly.

“Vee... What contract were you working on with the Count?”

He smiled. It was a gentle smile unlike the other.

“Why, the continuation of my last decade's work, of course.”

Yet that smile made me feel an even greater sense of dread.

“The Mk. VI.”

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Malco had returned to the wall and organized the defense atop the wall with his lieutenants. As the noon sun hung overhead, the air was tepid and humid. That made the path extra muddy for their enemies and would make the defense a much easier task till the weather changed to something drier.

Not that it's likely. They were in the marshlands of Yaleria after all.

Not that everything was looking up for the Duke and his loyal retainers. The Count had spared no expense hiring the best engineers money could muster. These professionals were not only good at their job, but quick. At the bottom of the hill were a trio of trebuchets which had been cobbled together from timber looted from the capital. More were being constructed. One saving grace was that they were so far down, and the wood too moist, that their range is limited. He and his men had dodged a few trial shots already. Luckily, the walls of Sulunaerg were thick. It would take weeks to make a serious breech.

Neither could they reach the keep its surrounding wall.

No one appeared to question how quickly Malco had recovered from his wound. His men thought it was perfectly in line with the kind of iron will they had come to expect of their liege. Each man shared a

quiet and deep respect for the pain they thought he bared with to continue fighting for them. Their hearts would no doubt shatter if they learned the truth, but an avoidance of that lie would lead to their defeat and likely their deaths.

Upon the strike of twelve the assault began in earnest once more. The threat of falling boulders added another danger, but they held the high ground with highly motivated and skilled warriors. They would fight to the death, not till the bottom of their coin purses.

“Ram at the gates!” One of the men atop the walls cried.

Malco left the men at the ramparts to drive away the ladders and grappling hooks and descended toward so he could aid in holding the line. Dozens of men were busy gathering up broken furniture and stones to prop up the gates. They put all their weight against it. It all buckled under the relentless thudding of the ram's head on the other side, but the door refused to splinter. Malco rushed into the fray and threw his shoulder into the mix

A stray thought of a certain someone who could help by freezing the gap between them with magic entered his mind, but he quickly banished it.

“Duke!?” A knight above the gatehouse yelled nervously.

“What now?” Malco screamed above the din of the door being bashed and other sounds of battle.

“I got a bad feeling,” he shouted back down.

“I got one in my shoulder! What of it?”

“Someone its approaching alone. I've not seen these colors before. Nor any suit of armor like—”

His voice trailed off, but quickly rose back with a terrified screech.

“Fire! Focus everything there!”

Malco remained blind to everything with the side of his place planted against the door, but he to felt something off. The hairs on his skin began to stand on end. An irritating grinding whine rung in his ears. Next he nearly went deaf along with the rest of his men when something hit the barricade especially hard. It struck two more times

which threw some of his men backwards. On the third stike the door itself began to splinter. By the fourth it was too late. Many of his men at the gate tried to pull back, but caught in the explosion of wood and pulverized stone all the same. Malco got thrown from his feet and splinter shrapnel cut up his face.

He watched the gate fly away in the opposite direction. By the time he hit the ground and came to a stop, the Duke rolled about the ground about fifteen meters back from the gate. Others around him were knocked out cold or were trying in vain to get back on their feet like himself.

Emerging through the dust was a single entity. Over two meters tall and clad in a suit of armor made from pitch-black iron. Yet it's too smooth to be mere iron. It had the appearance of obsidian, but soles of its boots clanked like steel and its joints made the sound of clockwork. An incessant ticking and clacking of gears could be heard, even more so as it moved. It's overlapping plates were thick, imposing and sinister in appearance. A black knight taken straight from the bardic tales.

A bascinet crowned the armor's torso, but had no holes in spare the visor. Its contents were obscured by darkness. From that inky depth a single orb of red light quivered and crisscrossed from side to side of the visor's eye slit. Malco could feel it in his heart which nearly leaped out of its chest when it settled on him.

“A shame we had to wait so long to meet again,” came a man's voice from with, complete with an inhuman metallic ring to it

Yet Malco recognized it immediately.

“Count Aaron,” the duke spat while picking his mighty sword off the ground.

Even the Count's own men were hesitant about entering the breech which had been made. That did not stop Aaron. He slowly marched forward, unarmed, toward Malco. The Duke could hardly believe it, but the voice could belong to no one else. Yet he could not understand how the portly old man could have fit into such a lithe suit of armor so tall.

Aaron lifted his right gauntlet up and inspected it with great detail. He rotated it slowly at the wrist and flexed its fingers. From the knuckles smoke rose, but the metal remained unharmed. No dent. No scratches. All he had to do was shake off the dust and splinters. The whole while the mechanical whirls continued with each move of his

body.

“As I have always told you, boy. There's no obstacle insurmountable to gold and silver.”

Chapter 102

The metal man strode through the debris littered yard. His explosive arrival accompanied by a litany of clicks and clanks. A black silhouette illuminated by a single blood red orb shining through its visor. One thousand clockwork gears sang in chorus as a red halo pieced the settling dust. Each plate strapped to his body adjusted and readjusted in tune to the shifting gears hidden underneath. They moved as if they had a mind of their own and were not strictly bound to the man who moved underneath.

This mountain of charcoal black steel clung to black knight's form. A voice, warped by a metallic cold ring, betrayed its wearer's true identity. Yet Count Aaron had always been a shorter and portly man. Hearing the corrupted voice emerge from behind the inky abyss of the armor's visor had all those present doubting their ears.

Duke Malco pulled himself back to his feet with great effort. He was forced to use the greatsword as a crutch. A dozen others groaned and rolled about with similar injuries, but were rendered causalities. All others cowered in fear. Even Count Aaron's own men shuddered and stared slack jawed from beyond the breach. Despite his head being befuddle due to trauma, the duke managed to raise the point of his of sword toward the intruder.

If the Count's appearance were not enough to instill a sense of terror, the echo in his voice ground down the resolve of men.

“Let us make this parley frank.”

“Traitors don't have any right to make demands,” Malco grunted, in spite on the pain.

“Don't let your pride deceive what your eyes are showing you—”

Aaron raised his right arm and inspected the forearm as he rotated it. He flexed the fingers and seemed to enjoy the intricacies of all the moving parts. He punctuated the pause by making a fist.

“—You fought bravely... Stubbornly. In vain. But bravely. Surrender yourself and I'll let your men walk free.”

“Call of your own men and I'll give you the chance to personally make me surrender,” Malco retorted.

Aaron sighed and appealed to the Duke's men surrounding him in the courtyard, “ Peerage under me for those that make the good Duke see reason!”

Not a single soul moved. Aaron stepped back and turned around, yet not a single one of the Duke's men stepped forward. Some of their eyes averted on instinct when his red orb centered on them, but no one lowered their weapons. Many of them had actually raised them. Those that were on the floor were now beginning to pull themselves off the ground as their lord had. With spears and billhooks in hand, the men began to cautiously make a distant semi-circle beside Malco. A forest of bristling iron points with oaken shaft firmly in their grip.

“There are things that you can't buy with your silver and gold,” Malco said with a pained grin.

Aaron slowly lowered his arm and glare. He intended to burrow a hole right through his liege's soul, but the Duke remained undeterred.

“Buy all the swords you want. Pay for hands to wield them and then steal the rest. All that wont purchase men who will stand beside you.”

Malco looked beyond the knight and spied Aaron's mercenaries who had still failed to pass through the breach. They were as terrified as the Duke's own men, but had not the resolve to pass through the threshold toward the steel giant who bushed aside the castle's gates with a sweep of its arm. They had likewise witnessed as Malco armed with Halazuel had cut down dozens with ease. So long as he wielded the heirloom, the man felt he had no reason to fear Count Aaron. His forefathers had triumphed over monstrosities for centuries. Aaron's halo could not taint its bluish-gray steel glint.

“Whence comes your own claim to Yaleria?” Aaron asked. “Was it not your ancestor who overthrew the rightful king? Do you not notice the irony of his progeny so casually accusing me of treason?.”

“My ancestor cast down a monster and a threat to all of humanity! How dare you muddle your tantrum with such a just cause!” Malco snapped back, spittle flying from his maw. “The world neared its ending then. The cause of that Apocalypse was cast down. There would have been no future for Yaleria had—”

“But you do betray the future!” Aaron shouted back. “How much silver have I heaped upon your coffers? My father and my

father's father did the same. Can you fathom such a number? And what has come of my enduring loyalty? Did you assume the role of provider? My father proposed a plan to drain the Billowbrook bogs. It would have taken less than a decade and given hectare upon hectare of arable land to feed your people. He spurned my father, and you likewise turned your nose up at such an en devour. You thought it was beneath you. Did you play the builder and make Mornurg an envy of the Western Empire? No! You spic and spanned the walls of the Brightkeep instead. What patronages did you indulge? Where are the artists to make great works which would be an envy of the world? Nowhere! You piled weapons to rust into dust. All in preparation for a phantom. An enemy that will never come!"

Count Aaron raised his arms in prayer toward the overcast skies.

"And when a man appeared who possessed the will to see these through you shrunk like a shadow under the noonday sun!" Aaron's lowered his arms and pointed furiously at the Duke. "I could blame that all upon poor leadership and lack of vision. Most men are guilty of these things and I have learned you cannot allow yourself to hate your fellow man for such things. Least you grow to hate the world... But you coward. You let her die. Your very own flesh and blood. Your sister. My fiance. Because you'd sacrifice your whole realm so you can continue playing soldier like your cur of a father and his grandfather before him! Your pride could never let the son of a measly peasant outshine the polish on your sword!"

"Aaron you treacherous son a dirt farmer! How dare you!" Malco erupted.

"You always thought I had it in me, but figured I never had the means to do it. Didn't you? You thought there would be the time in the world. A simpleminded grunt like yourself could never understand what a true statesman is. How to turn a small fortune into the capital to build a nation is beyond you. You left me every year with so little after those criminal taxes you impose, but a little lending here and there and you can make a mountain out of a molehill."

"No mere money-changer can ever be a leader of men!" Malco bellowed.

"And I will no longer bow to a glorified bandit! Your father and grandfather were at least grounded in reality, You, however, appear to have taken after your neurotic mother. Perhaps, with luck,

the bad blood she left behind would have been chased out by your sister."

"All so your nieces and nephews would be my heirs..."

A foul mood swept over Malco. He could not resist letting loose with one final barb. The most poisonous one in his collection.

"... And speaking of which. Have you come to terms what harm your insatiable lust for power had on her health? She was too sweet a thing to be dancing to your strings. No, I doubt you noticed. You only cared about her because through her you could get your greasy hands on Yaleria!"

"I care for both!" Aaron's metallic voice rang and shook the castle walls. "Which is more than I can say about you!"

"Your words are as withered as the grapes you try growing on that estate of yours. Yaleria is an old horse, a sick and frail one, but she's resilient and all we have to stand in the face of evil. The men who reside here have always acknowledged their duty. Everyone but you. With blood so thin and minds so weak, the sound of two silver coins rubbing together drove you and your father mad with greed. You'd burden Yaleria with the weight of all your ambitions and break her back. You are no man, but stubborn as an ass and as sour as the wine you make in those wretched and pathetic vineyards you grow on acid soil. And for what reason? To impress those weak louts hailing from the lands of milk and honey throughout the Empire?" Malco pressed on and twist his words into the cracks of Aaron's temperament. "A pathetic man such as yourself who has to rely on sell swords, magic tricks and gadgets has no right to rule these lands. The Almighty will never grace you or your family with the right, the divine right, to carry such a hefty task. Keeping the eternal watch over the Shadelands is bigger than you or I. It is through my family that the Western Empire has not been overrun by the undead many times over."

"And if the serfs were not tied to their lands in their serfdom, the miserable wretches would have fled long ago... What do you know of the lesser, common men of Yaleria? What do you know of the hardships they endure under the weight of your boot? Your blood may be as blue as it comes, but blood runs blue when it is cold. Cold and uncaring to the suffering of lesser beings. Perhaps you have been too preoccupied with your toils to realize what events are happening around you. Whole populations are uprooted and flood south.

Meanwhile, heretics and monster fornicators are chased by hounds of the inquisition toward the North-East. That Empire you so desperately tied your loyalties to is dying. It will not die quietly, nor gently. When it implodes, the food stocks flooding in which you rely to feed the people will cease. Mass starvation. Mass exodus. You will rule over bones and nothing more."

"Snake venom!" Malco roared in reply. "By the grace of the Almighty himself, the covenant was for the Empire of Men to persist henceforth! By his grace I will weather your petty insults, but I will not tolerate your heresy!"

The ebony black helmet encasing Aaron's head shook back and forth. A sign of resignation. Malco would not yield. Not to that which Aaron saw as the embodiment of reason. And Malco could not bring Aaron to heel by reminding him of Yaleria's duty. Aaron could not be persuaded of the Empire's endurance. To say that it could ever fall would be akin to suggesting the sky could fall.

"So be it," Aaron cold voice rang. "If you intend to continue clinging to your ways in lieu of reason... I will see to it that your name goes down in history the same manner as the Mad King's did."

He raised an arm up high, accompanied by the regular clicks and clacks of his armor, and dropped it down in a single violent motion.

"Resume the attack!"

The cut puppet strings of his men were mended. Count Aaron's words were carried on a sinister wind and shocked the nerves of every man present like a bucket of ice water. The front row of mercenaries nearest to the door trudged forward before Malco's men could rally themselves try pushing them back with arrows and slings.

A chill wind gave way to a cold gale. A few more observant soldiers on both sides froze in their tracks and stared bewildered at the air in front of them. Large clouds of mist from a winter frost clouded their vision. After the Count's metallic ring pierced the noon skies, the ground itself began to shake. Aaron and Malco were both forced to fix their footing as the tremor intensified. Neither understood what was happening.

Erupting from the soil was a palisade of ice crystals. Translucent with a pure blue hue, the spears of frost thrust up into the air before the Duke's men. Had they not been sufficiently armored the spear points would have skewered them. Instead, the spikes thudded

into their chests and sent the front rank flying back into their comrades. Malco's men on the walls recoiled as the palisade shot up and high enough to tower over the outer walls.

Aaron spun 'round toward the gate which had sealed behind. He strode forward and slammed his fist into surface, but the wall was no mere brittle pond ice. It sung like a struck tuning fork and the crystalline structure diffused the kinetic energy of the inhuman blow throughout its superstructure. Successive blows caused a crude sympathy, but left nothing but a couple centimeters of shaved ice at atop the Count's black sabatons.

Malco's eyes were drawn to follow the currents of the shivering wind. He gazed up to the inner walls surrounding the castle's main keep. High above him he spied the unmistakable black dress flutter in the breeze along with the wavy platinum blonde hair. However, the distinct pale skin was also on display. His men likewise followed the eyes of their liege and pointed in amazement at the woman standing boldly upon the parapet.

Her arms were held out with her wrists slackened, so that they drooped toward the ground. What struck a cold spike in Malco's heart was that her hands were wreathed in that blue ethereal flame. This flame shaped itself into two claws which engulfed her petite and pale hands. They were like oversized gloves, yet moved freely according to her will. And they held dominion over the spires of ice rising into the sky. Their eruption from the earth, as they smothered the battlements below, mirrored the movements of the claws. As she pulled her wrists back, the icicles curled backward and completed the cage.

The Duke had no thoughts of relief. He felt the cold spike of dread through his heart send a shivering tremor throughout his body. Part of it was anger, the prevailing emotion he felt in her presence. Another part would be dread. That specter which haunted him had revealed itself to more than his eyes alone. The rest of it was shame. He knew without her help Sulunaerg's fall would have been immediate. And that's why only in his heart a dull thump of relief beat.

Aaron clawed one more time at the solid wall of ice and found it too slippery to scale it with his gauntlets' claws. He expended all his option and back away from the magical barrier. No one could see his face, but the suit of armor worked so closely in tandem with him that you could gauge his body language with a glance. There was no evident concern. Annoyance is the sole emotion to glean.

That remained true when the Duke's men began to circle around him. They kept their distance because they knew full well what strength he had after smashing apart the gate with ease. A dozen spear points could perhaps prevail with a thousand cuts. The Duke's men corralled the Count against the gate, but waited for their orders before engaging.

“Well played, boy,” the Count chuckled. “So your mystery courtier was a sorceress all along? I would have executed this scene differently had I known.”

Hyria of the Shadelands, rightful heir to Yaleria, the one better known as the Duke's mystery courtier. She appeared in her true form to no one other than Malco, but she wandered the lands with a human disguise. Count Aaron recognized her since she attended his final social event as Count. No one informed him that she could conjure such an arcane feat, let alone her being versed in the magical arts. His safety had been at great risk and he had been vulnerable at that time. That realization unsettled him.

The pale woman. The beautiful lady with the long platinum blonde hair. Yet no one knew her identity. They suspected her of being the Duke's lover and left it at that. Many were content to know their liege had interest in women at all. They could not have known Hyria bore responsibility for driving away all other suitors. The mystery of her origin and pedigree gnawed at them. She did not have commoner blood, that much they knew for sure. Had they realized her true nature, the Church's Inquisition would have swarmed over Yaleria and burnt the Duke's castle to the ground years ago.

None of that deterred Aaron. He had come too far and given up too much. There would be no going back. Going back would also be unnecessary.

“Call your men back, Malco,” Aaron's synthetic voice growled.

The Duke manged to pull his eyes off the woman on the battlements above him and leveled his gaze on the shining orb of light quivering within the Count's vizor. Not with fear, but shaking with anger. Malco's emotions were running wild and his focus shattered. He did not have the intestinal wherewithal to commit. An instinct screaming at him from his guts pleaded for him to exercise caution.

“Steel wins battles, gold wins wars,” Aaron's metal voice

seethed. “With this alloy, I will change the world!”

Aaron clenched his fists, and from between his fingers, a purplish-black mist billowed forth and pooled on the ground.

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“The Mk. VI: My greatest accomplishment, “Vee nodded to himself with an air of smug self-satisfaction. “Far from being my true magnum opus, but a great leap forward nonetheless.”

The gaunt and lanky man glowed as he spoke about his work. It gave him a sick, twisted and ironic halo amidst the settling dust. His sterile bald head glistening. It gave the impression of good health, but I knew he himself embodied the opposite. Vee fit the image of a man who subsisted himself on instant noodles and four hours of sleep. I knew the man was far from the paragon of mental health despite his jovial mood. I'd say it's because of the facial tics.

He couldn't keep his pride bottled up any longer.

“I must admit the minute details of its machinations are a black box to me. It is operational and that is all I care for at the present time. I cannot complain all things considered.”

I remained an unwilling and captive audience. My body battered beyond a good night's rest putting me back on my feet.

“Did you manage to make it even larger?” I groaned as painful memories returned.

Vee's Mk. V had been a giant living suit of armor. That thing enough strength to swat Chris out of the air and knock her unconscious. It's armored hide had been thick enough to resist the razor sharpness of her talons as well. It had hands large enough to grasp my torso like any man could wring another's neck. I had to tear its core from the wound in its chest to stop it. Had I not, the giant suit of armor would have squeezed my innards out through both ends. A monster twice the size would have as much destructive power as a howitzer.

“Oh ho, no-no-no,” Vee chortled as he waggles a finger in my face. “Bigger is not always better, my friend.”

I nearly snarled at the nerve of him throwing about the word friend so readily. He paced back and forth in front of me and avoided

trading the smirk on his face for my furious gaze. Vee drew his attention to a pocket watch which he fished out inner coat pocket instead.

“Come. We are behind schedule,” he said and turned his back on me.

It took a few steps for him to realize I was not following. I could offer no reaction beside an exasperated shrug. My legs were shot and my body still convulsed in excruciating pain whenever I moved too much. I couldn't muster the strength to flip him off. Something I regretted now more than the pain I had subjected myself to.

Vee turned on his heels and moseyed on back. This time he pulled up his other sleeve and revealed a bracer around his forearm. Two thin fibrous antenna flipped up at opposite ends and were quickly connected by a continuous tendril of lightning. It hummed and crackled weakly, the string of electricity dancing about. I quickly got the impression it was some sort of measuring device. The string became flat-lined, as if calibrated, and then whipped up and down like P and S waves on a seismograph.

“Residual traces... Far less than a normal decay rate... And do I detect... Yes! And divine as well. Fascinating.”

A flick of his wrist and the contraption folded away and vanished beneath his wrinkly coat which could have used a good ironing a month ago.

“My apologies. It appears I misjudged the regenerative capabilities of this ward.”

My face went blank. I could feel my face tic and unconsciously blinked a couple times. Vee's latest cryptic curve ball had me shaking the debris out of my head. I just about blurted out 'what ward?', but thought better of it immediately. Once more I would put myself in the subordinate position in this mockery of a conversation.

“You can detect it with that... thing?”

“The Divine? No. Not the energy itself. You can, however, detect the divine by measuring its shadow. It is no mere bending of natural laws. That is magic's domain. The divine make a complete mockery of the mundane. It suspends the very laws of nature. Such is the definition of a miracle. Making the impossible possible. Something unpredictable outside of prophecy. It is something mortals were ever

meant to comprehend... It lies in the realm of gods and angels. I must now confirm servitors of old gods are capable as well."

Vee fiddled with the device on his wrist further. He moved dials and other knobs with clicks and clacks as if he were working with an abacus. I continued to stare at him, dumbfounded. How could he piece that together so quickly on so very little?

"Fascinating. I am sure the Church would throw a fit if they knew. You have revealed such signs to them before have you not? I must assume they mistook it for mere sorcery. The signs of sorcery are certainly there. Yes. They are. The one who cast this is not merely a magical being, but divine as well. Truly fascinating."

And with a flick of his wrist he stowed away the reading device on his wrist back under the sleeve of his coat. The professorial nut-job's attention snapped back like an overextended rubber band and fixated itself back to me.

"Conjecture would lead me to say you are holding together thanks to this judiciously applied ward. A great deal of pure positive energy. Ripe with healing properties. Tsk tsk tsk," He clicked his tongue disapprovingly. "Haphazardly applied though. Very sloppy. A great purity of positive energy for healing properties nonetheless."

Susan's handiwork. But when did she—oh right, the kiss. Remembering it brought a bit of color back to my face. Even at times like that she was looking out for me... But why through a— She wouldn't for such a petty— Would she?

"Hold on one second, Mr. Laven." Vee said mirthfully while delving his arm back into his inner coat pockets. "I can remedy this conundrum of ours immediately!"

One glass vial and a red rock later, the alchemist prepared to show his handiwork. He also stumbled along with that I assumed were his best bedside manners.

"One must dig a solid foundation before one builds. But you, good sir, are akin to permafrost. An effort in futility... Build as high as you wish, but one arctic gale and the whole thing comes tumbling down... I assume it overloaded after compensating for that egregious chest wound."

Vee dropped the red rock into the liquid and it quickly dissolved and dyed the water red. At least I hope that it's water and nothing else.

Like acid. A really strong base could be as disastrous. I got a bad feeling sinking into my chest while guessing what exactly would happen next. This is something you gain through experience.

“This may sting,” Vee said, ever so casually. “For a moment.”

I still couldn't feel my legs. At least not enough to get out of way. He removed his thumb from the and flicked its contents at me. It struck me right in the chest and face. What I felt immediately was an acute burning sensation. I experienced what it's like to be flayed alive and then dunked into a tank full of moonshine. My body keeled over. Muscle after muscle seized up and a second later I had been reduced to a shivering mess curled up into the fetal position. I very much wanted to scream, but my lungs had imploded as I gasped in pain.

Yet it ended as quickly as it began. I only had to endure about ten seconds of excruciating pain. That seemed to be my lot in life.

One coughing fit later and my chest popped right back out again. My lungs fill with refreshing air. I didn't mind it was still laced with dust. What had felt like every nerve in my body being set on fire with a blowtorch faded. A morphine overdose wishes it had this kind of pain killing strength. I could also feel my legs again. My hands pawed at the ground and I slowly rose back onto my feet.

“Hmm. My apologies again. That took six seconds longer than it should have. It appears that condition of yours is rather pervasive.”

His blasé attitude made me want to punch him right in the face. I could not muster the strength to do so before glancing down. That wound across my chest had closed. The sight of it gone blew my anger away for a moment. A thin line of scar tissue —from my shoulder to the opposite waist— was all that remained. It felt solid to the touch as well. No pain shooting through me when I pressed it. No rupture. It's no mere suture. That liquid had been a bonafide health potion, the kind of generic thing you purchase in a video game.

“A Philosopher's Stone?” I croaked.

Vee's eyes lit up. A pursed lip smile spread across his face as he nodded.

“I heard you say you were a Free Brewer, so I assumed—”

“That I was well versed in Alchemy? Half true. I spent the teens years of my life apprenticing, but I did not remain long enough to be anything more than a mere apprentice.”

He waved turned his back and beckoned me to follow with a wave of his hand. I took a couple trial steps to see if my balance had returned. My legs were indeed working. However, I decided to follow him slowly. Cautiously. I put my front foot forward onto the staircase with trepidation. A couple shakes of the railing told me it was still quite secure despite the surrounding destruction.

“I grew disillusioned with alchemy once I fully understood its limits,” Vee said while he climbed the stairs a fair distance above me. “It is nothing more than reconfiguration of base elements.”

“Lead into gold?” I asked.

“A procedure rendered impracticable due to the costs involved. You'd do better becoming a prospector.”

“Eternal life? That's what a stone is for, isn't it?”

“Had I presented that stone to my old master, the man would have beat me blind. Rife with impurities. Useful as nothing more than a healing poultice. The purest of the pure would have resulted in your body rejecting it with unimaginable convulsions. Your suffering would be so great that it could very well have driven you insane.”

I would have liked to have heard that before it dumped on my head. They have those commercials that are half health risk warnings for a reason.

“Nature abhors an alchemist. The human body rejects such crude methods of longevity. It is possible to extend your lifetime indefinitely with a Philosopher's Stone. But there are few records that suggest anyone lived beyond three centuries with a Stone's aid. One does not come out the other side the same. Eternal life, preservation of the body, all at the cost of the self. A bittersweet irony which the art of Alchemy is famous for.”

Vee reached the top of the stairs, turned around and waited for me. I dreaded the rest of the ascent, but pushed through regardless. A sickening feeling in my stomach remained every time I was forced to look at him. That's neglecting to mention when I'm forced to stand next to him. He stood just about as tall as me, yet he weighed significantly less due to his gangly build. If you looked past the baggy eyes there

wasn't much in the way of health. He had glistening eyes, pearly teeth which grinned excessively and nothing more.

“Abhorrent. That would be were your special clubhouse comes from.”

“Yes,” Vee nodded. “History has no shortage of persecutions against Alchemy. From the temples of old which accused it of defiling the natural order. Those Universities magi classified it as a banned dark art. Its practitioners were forced into an alliance of self preservation. A crime against one member would behoove all others to harry the lives of the offending party. Their power grew as they gained the ears of the powerful. Those souls which could not petition Wizard nor Priest would come to us.”

The professor gestured for me to walk with him, but I opted to remain put. He took my blowing him off with an understanding bow of his head and continued onward. Because I didn't quite trust him, so I followed behind him by ten steps. Something keep gnawing at me. He intervened late, saved my life, healed me, but there was still something off about his behavior. I could hear a voice of protest yelling out from the back of my mind. Yet I could not place my finger on it. There were too many unanswered questions. I followed along, played along, and hoped that missing piece of the puzzle would reveal itself as Vee kept talking.

“Now, where was I? Ah yes! Alchemy failed me. What I coveted more than anything else is the power of creation in the hands of a mortal man. Alchemy could make things, but through destruction. A trade. Twas nothing more. My veins do not course with the blood of mages. I am also not a praying man. The powers of the arcane and divine were beyond me. My eyes turned toward the heavens. I reached out with my hands to grasp at the very manifestation of heaven on earth.”

I hazarded a guess, “Lightning.”

“Correct!” Vee looked back and smiled. “All the pantheons of the ancients placed the dominion over lightning as the highest or among the most high manifestations of the gods themselves. If I could control it, the mysteries of the world would unravel.”

And he succeeded. His gadgets were proof of that. But along the way he must have realized he was playing with electricity. Right?

“My research grabbed the attention of Ouroboros. They

were surprised to see how far I managed to progress on my own. They offered me a place among them. I gave my name in return and henceforth became known as 'Vee'. But I did not find the solace I expected. I gained access to their archives, and their expertise. To my dismay they had discovered all I had labored over. I found myself forced to accept lightning as but a mere physical phenomenon. I was not much older than you are now when I had yet another dream crushed. It had not my work that impressed them. Only the speed at which I had progressed. They saw latent talent to advance other fields. But they could not help but let me realize the futility by myself and treated it as a joke. Another bittersweet exchange. I had grown accustomed to such things."

Did that mean that Ouroboros had knowledge of electricity? That would be a huge revelation. If they did, the group was a century or so behind home. First man discovers fire and then makes it ever hotter. He eventually discovers electricity and his hunger for more energy grows. I had to make sure.

"Then those gadgets of yours are the result of your experiment... Do they work on alternating or direct?"

Vee came to a sudden halt. His whole body turned to face me this time. The first thing I noticed was the puzzled expression on his face. I had something that went over his head. That face was enough to settle the issue. But a more frightening thought struck me. Vee with the tools of Tesla.

"Direct of course," Vee said as he pulled another vial from his jacket.

Inside the container surged raw lightning. I got a good look at it for the first time up-close. Sure as shooting it was lightning in a bottle. Sure as That shouldn't be anything more than a metaphor. Yet there it is bouncing around inside a container no bigger than a D sized battery. Vee's turn to pose questions came. I could watch them form in real time by watching his facial muscle twitch and convulse. I had to move this along and take his mind off it. This man is THE one person I didn't want to know the king of things. I knew about a more modern world.

"So how the hell does all this Alchemy and lightening tie into your golems? And why does that bring you to dormant magic ley line?"

That's the crux of the matter. Vee hadn't yet been forthwith about the basics of his being here. This world must truly operate on a

whole other system. If it wasn't magic holding that lightning inside that thick glass case... Then what the hell was?

I shuddered to think what would happen if you could combine the two. Thankfully someone took pity on me and granted a stroke of luck. He appeared ready to continue gushing about his accomplishments rather than press me on the revolutionary hint I had dropped.

"The Mk. V —and the others before it— were little more than glorified containment shells. Failures. Every one of them. No matter how attempts I conducted. Nothing more than an assembly line creation of steel women I had yet to perfect constructing a proper core. You could say I accidentally gave birth to hearts instead. Pulsating beings made of abyssal energy which bonded to the metal encasing it. My theory had revolved around preventing that moment of critical mass, the moment accumulating abyssal energy gains sentience. I created something much too large. Too large... As you personally observed."

About the size of a grapefruit. I was forced to recall the sensation of it in my hand. That bitter cold crawling through my veins as it spread its tendrils across my body.

"You are shivering. I see, so it invokes a cold sensation."

My body went rigid and I glared furiously back at Vee as he casually studied my reaction to having these memories dredged back to the surface. He continued to play around at his leisure and it began to piss me off. I threw the ball back into his court, the least I could do in my state was get answers out of him while I had the chance.

"You wanted a more compact version of the war machine?"

"I never intended to create war machines to begin with," Vee replied.

Every question I ask gives birth to a slew of new ones. This was an exercise in futility.

"We've reached the crux of our misunderstanding, Mr. Laven. Securing funding for my research in this troubled times means I am reduced to playing the role of a petty arms-dealer. In more peaceful times, better times, I would have grown fat off the grants for the various universities and magus academies. No. I've been reduced to achieving my research milestones through trial and error."

“To what end?” I asked.

“You already know. I can feel that you do,” Vee said with another creepy smile. “Don't play dumb with me now... Or is it less painful when it comes from my lips instead of yours?”

An uncharacteristic insult to my courage. So he wants this to turn into a dialogue rather than a lecture. Does he sense that I know more than I wish to let on? That worries me. That's something I do not want to be responsible for, so I'm forced to imagine what he could do with that kind of knowledge. He tosses lightning around like nothing, but does he know Fleming's left hand rule? No. He doesn't even know what AC or DC are. Those are still things better left unexplained. I'd sooner play along with his pseudo-mysticism.

“...Cores are abyssal energy.”

“Correct,” Vee nodded.

That left one conclusion.

“You want to control abyssal energy.”

Vee's lips curled into an ever wider smile. I didn't think he had it in him to be more of a creep. I'll refrain from making that bet in the future.

Fire and a boiling flask were not enough for Vee. Lightning in a bottle was not enough for him either. What he wanted a power greater than that. Something he could call his own and which would act according to his will.

“Precisely,” he nodded. “Yet each time I obtained a core it gained a level of sentience. Sapience is never far behind. My efforts to create containment shells always resulted in the creation of an artificial lifeforms.”

“... Those living suits of armor.”

“As inevitable as the sunrise. No matter what I've tried the result has always been the same. Once you gather sufficient abyssal energy, so that it reaches critical mass, the result is a core which takes the form of a monster. And a monster girl, at that. Without fail. No matter how many hundreds of times I have tried. Some external force, some unseen hand, breathes life into it and shapes its form.”

And the result of that would be the steel golems under Price Deron's command. The giant was the result of trying to make a more powerful core. It backfired. I am sure Deron did not complain, but apparently Vee had been disappointed. It had been a step backward in his research."

"And this newest version achieved—"

"—Limited control," Vee interrupted, unable could not contain himself. "And the solution to the problem is so simple. Rather than allowing the core to reach critical mass, all I needed to do was link a sufficient number of nodes which had equal mass. Keep them moving in a constant state of flux to introduce a false chaos, and it becomes somewhat malleable. It all seems so simple now. I cannot believe it took me more than decade."

I shuddered to think what brought upon this revelation.

"All it took was data from a unique case of prolonged exposure."

Fuck. That would be me.

"When abyssal energy meets the divine, they annihilate each other in equal proportions. And it does so instantaneously. To see it occur before my very eyes and in slow motion in every detail... Jumping out from the numbers on the page... I thought I would cry."

And he looked very close to start crying by merely remembering it.

"And all it took was a few rib fractures," I spat.

Vee motioned toward the charred remains of Nerick and said, "Consider that debt paid in full."

"I don't. And I wont."

"Inconsequential," Vee said with a dismissive wave of his hand as he turned and walked away. "I suggest we move onto more pressing matters. Onward to the main event."

"Wait. What were Mk. one through three?"

I had to ask. Consequences be damned I had to ask. He didn't turn around this time. We had arrived at the foot of the stairs up to the

throne overlooking the treasure room. All that dense settling dust lay below us as crisp rays of fresh sunlight shone through the kaleidoscope ceiling of stained glass. It applied a soothing layer of calm to the roiling chaos surrounding me. Everything felt as peaceful as a cathedral in a war zone. A place of sanctuary. But now I felt an oncoming desecration and that peace would not last.

“My homunculi experiments,” Vee said as he placed his hands on the throne's right arm rest. “A result of blending my middling alchemical skills with my then newfound control of lightning.”

Images of neckbolts danced inside my head.

“A Frankenstein monstrosity. In other words: Patches.”

“Patches is the sole member of the Mk. II generation. A failure, but I managed to salvage her into an assistant. And I have not heard of this Frankenstein before. Could you have perchance heard of a similar experiment being conducted? I had believed I was the only one.”

“No. Just an old folk story,” I said and shook my head.

“I have no time for stories. We have work to be done. Now. Would you be so kind as to assist me? We need to displace this furniture.”

I looked down at the Throne sitting between us. It looked as solid as a rock. Bolted into the stone.

“This isn't meant to be moved,” I said.

“Of course it wasn't. But it still can be. Now push. Or pull. Whatever you prefer.”

I watched as Vee struggled to topple the throne forward with his skinny arms. He clenched his eyes and grit his teeth tight. It was kind of pathetic to watch. I forgot the sensation of disgust for a moment and felt pity for the first time. Next came the feeling of curiosity. What exactly was he trying to show me?

I grabbed hold of the throne's splat and wedged my shoulder behind it for good measure. I struggled to get some good leverage. It seemed to be an effort in futility until the stone slab beneath the throne's legs began to shudder. Whatever mechanism had kept the throne secured had not weathered the years well. After struggling and

laboring for about a minute, the throne clicked and jostled forward. Too far forward. That mechanism snapped completely and the throne came loose. I watched it horror as another priceless artifact and national treasure of Yaleria tumbled down the stairs and disintegrated. All that polished wood, precious metal trimmings and velvet scattered across the floor below.

The professor did not care less. His eyes lit up as a hole in the floor opened up into another hidden stairwell.

“As I suspected. Excellent. Come. Time is short.”

It was pitch dark down there, but Vee showed no concern. He merely uncovered that device on his wrist and activated it again. The glow of flickering lightning radiated a suitable aura of light. He did not wait for me. He didn't look back to make sure I was behind him. I had to hurry up and descend afterward. That electrical wrist torch wasn't that powerful. It would be me stumbling down some ancient stairs in the dark if I hesitated any longer.

“Is this the pillar you were talking about?” I asked the shadow of the back in front of me.

“Walls of stone with a quality this poor? No. This is merely a passage toward the terminal... Heh heh heh,” Vee chuckled. “Not even those Yalerian rebels of old could bottle up their curiosity. Not entirely... They could have sealed it completely, but the temptation proved to be too much.”

“So they moved the seat of power... Figuratively.”

“That is the most likely of reasons. No one other than members of the Duke's family have access to that treasure room. At least until this week.”

“And that is how Aaron roped in the Silver Bannermen?”

“To the tower? No. They would never have such high hopes to plunder the Brightkeep. No. I imagine Count Aaron has dangled access to the plunder the Shadelands as adequate payment for their services... On top of all the gold and silver he paid upfront.”

“And no one has ever bothered to explore the Shadelands?”

“Forbidden. Which is a shame since I am certain it holds many secrets.”

That it does. It also holds powerful undead beings in a sort of suspended animation. I imagine that would be the reason why access was traditionally forbidden.

“The undead have swelled their ranks from those it defeats. To sortie into the Shadelands to cleanse it of evil is to give strength to such a place. The gods sealed it away with stone for that reason.”

And now they would be wary to go for wholly different reason.

“A well of magic power, right? I asked. “But if that's true, and you cannot use magic, why would you bother coming all this way? You can't tell me it's out curiosity and nothing more than that.”

“No. Babel was a tool of the ancients. One I wish to understand. I have my suspicions that it was a device attuned to magic and magic alone. I suspect it may have merely used concentrated magic to channel abyssal energy to our world. Of all its wonders it is described being capable of, the mere use of magic would be insufficient. Other scholars have disagreed. My own peers within Ouroboros did so as well. I seek to know once and for all. If I am correct... Then control of abyssal energy is not relegated solely to the Monster Lord Lilith. I can think of no greater waste of its potential than solely within her possession.”

A heard a hint of anger in his voice. Jealousy perhaps. It stuck out like a sore thumb after all his exuberance until now. He had clearly wound himself up into a foul mood very suddenly.

“The mutation of all and any abyssal energy into licentious female forms... What a disgrace. There is so much more which could be done.”

“You mean like bringing about the apocalypse?” I said, hazarding Vee's ire.

He stopped in his tracks and looked back up at me. Shadows dancing across his face as the lightning dancing across his wrist flickered.

“Control,” he replied. “The divine can manifest miracles. So can the abyssal. The divine can rain hellfire and annihilate nations. So too does abyssal energy. That we've seen more productive uses of the divine and destructive of the abyssal is a mere consequence of the beings put in its charge. It was not man who brought about its own

destruction with Babel. It unleashed creatures it could not combat. Behemoth, Leviathan and Ziz: the original monsters. All other monsters —barring the demons— which exist today were sired from their split blood as the gods slew them. A beast which crushed cities underfoot. A serpent that roiled the oceans into floods which flooded continents. Ziz, a raptor of such immense size that its wingspan blotted out the sun and withered plant-life wherever it flew. These were released by man, not created by!"

A moment of calm took hold. I glared down suspiciously at Vee and he looked back at me with eyes full of fiery passion. We stood steadfast and unmoving in the cramped spiral staircase leading deep down in the unseen and hidden bowls of the Brightkeep. Some ancient secret lay hidden in its guts. Vee coveted it. I needed to use it. But that gnawing doubt in the back of my head kept biting harder and harder. Yet I still couldn't put my finger on it.

"You need to unleash this seal, do you not? Vee broke the silence and asked.

I continued to glare at him skeptically.

"You were hired by the Shadeland royalty, were you not?"

An angry frown spread across my face.

"She hired you to unleash the sealed magic... She will need it. The Mk. VI will destroy Duke Malco. When he dies, the entire Duchy of Yaleria will descend upon both our heads. The Silver Bannermen will hunt us both down. Aaron's men will surround us and flay us alive. If not them, our tarrying will see us caught in a Church net. Come. Now. Our time is short."

"I could manage," I replied.

"With your companions? What could make you so deluded."

He posed that rhetorical question and continued to descend the stairs before I could confront him on his parting remark. I followed once more, but only because the sole light down here came from him. He is also right about my mission. I had to see this through. That's likely the limit of options afforded to me many cruel twists of fate. I could turn around and head upstairs... Maybe find a way out of that throne room, meet up with the girls and make an escape... But I knew there were certain risks involved. Fatal risks. I did not know all the risks of following Vee. They could lead to better consequences than I can

imagine if I turned my back.

Vee's echoing footsteps stopped. He had already descended a number of turns down the stairs and there was little light which still reached me. I followed slowly, reluctantly, and the sight which left Vee speechless hit me full force in the face. White. Pure white marble. At least I thought it was marble. Marble typically has imperfections; grains of gray and black coursing through it. It could be polished limestone, but it didn't feel solid enough to be. It actually hurt to look at. If I stared too long my retinas might wreck themselves like an old TV and see nothing but white.

Deep down inside the Brightkeep is this wide and spacious room of pure white. It reflected the light from Vee's wrist device a hundred times and lit it up as brighter than a dozen florescent light bulbs could ever hope to. I guessed this room spread out about fifteen hundred square feet or so. It reached up about as tall as a two story house as well. Yet for all that space there was nothing more than a raised stone platform. It had the look of an altar at first. I had seen quite a few of them recently... But this one gave off a totally different feeling. It couldn't be used for worship. There's nothing holy about this place. Its pure whiteness be damned. It felt sterile. Surgical. No wonder Vee had the looked so at home.

“Marvelous. Wonderful. Look at the engineering. Not a spec of dust. Mr. Laven, no one has been here before us for about two thousand years. But feast your eyes on it. Not a single sign of structural weakness or decay. Marvelous!”

He rushed off toward the solitary stone furniture and greedily traced his hands over its every crevice. I followed behind and the reason for his ever growing excitement became apparent. Engraved in the white stone were patterns of black. They were not haphazard stains or grains in the rock. No. They were deliberate patterns etched into the surface. Raised patterns. Set in order. Like a—

“AH!” Vee blurted out so loud I thought my eardrums would implode. “Elder Tongue... It's Elder Tongue!”

“I'll have elderly hearing if you don't knock it off,” I groaned.

“It's the language of Canaan. This is a pillar of Babel. There can be no mistake!” Vee continued to shout without care of my protests.

“So then... What do they say?”

“I have no idea!” Vee squealed happily

Wait. What?

“What do you mean you can't read it?”

“This is the lost language of the ancients. The same the gods themselves speak. Passed down to man. Lost. Revoked. Plucked from t he minds of men as punishment for the rise and fall of Babel.”

They appeared to me like any other esoteric language. I couldn't glean any pattern or meaning from them at a glance either. There was not anything similar to them that I could recall. They certainly were not similar to the runes used throughout the Empire... I had glanced at Susan's work before when she read through half that library. I cannot recall anything in those dusty old tomes looking like these. Neither could I recall anything back home which looked like these scribblings. If you were to mash all the above together into a single jumbled mess you might get something close.

“It's inert,” Vee said, the enthusiasm finally draining from him. “Quickly now. We need to break the seal.”

My hand automatically reached for the satchel tied around my waist. Inside it jangled the lone green crystal. Through the woven bag it felt like an oversized H-2 pencil. I wrapped my hand around its girth through the bag, but could not bring myself to move forward.

Vee did not have the same patience before as he grumbled. He raised his wrist device back to his face and adjusted something on it. The flat lined tether of lightning kicked off into a flurry of activity. It rose and fell continuously. Made peaks and valley chaotically.

“He has begun,” Vee's voice spoke up, distorted through the electronic warble of his device.

I turned my head toward him slowly and he in kind turned it gradually to meet my gaze.

“Begun what?” I asked.

“Count Aaron has activated the Mk. VI's systems. I have tuned this device to monitor its vitals. Data collection... The one who charged you for this task... There is now a time limit on her head and on that of the Duke.”

“You can monitor it. That means you can control it... Or did you not think Aaron would turn it on you?”

“Perhaps. But I have no need to. If I cannot witness this piece of Babel in working order... I will have to take the Mk. VI's maiden activation as a consolation prize.”

He smiled one last time. And not in friendly way either. Vee grinned because he could not suppress his smug satisfaction. His position was a perfect one. He had no losing conditions. Unlike me.

“Do you think the Count is going to protect you from the Church as well? You said that being here put you in a world of trouble... I've been in one ever since I set out, so that doesn't bother me. But I imagine you'd prefer to keep up your clandestine experiments.”

“I could mange,” he replied. “You, Mr. Laven, would not. You need Hyria to ensure your safety. And the Mk. VI will destroy her and Malco both. There is no man, woman, weapon or otherwise that can stop that device. Not in all Yaleria. Not as Yaleria stands at this very moment.”

I peeled myself away and stared back down at the console before me. My eyes darted back and forth across the etchings of a language no one left living could read. Betwixt it all I spied a singular crevice in its surface. A closer look revealed a hole in the otherwise flawless white stone. Exactly the right size for the crystal in my pouch. I slipped my hand inside and pulled it free.

A thin coating of green light lit up myself, Vee and the white surface for a few meters around it. I don't remember it ever glowing like that. My confusion was far outshone by Vee's excitement. He could barely contain himself, or salivating, as he looked at the crystal in my grip.

“Void magic. In your bare hands. Fascinating.”

To me it felt no more impressive than holding some smooth mineral. It felt cold to the touch, but nothing more. Vee, on the other hand, desperately fought back the urge to reach out and touch it. His feet were uneasy on the ground as well. It's as if he were worried its deadly touch would seep its way through the floor and work its way up his legs and into his heart. At least that's how I understood this deadly thing was supposed to be. There's a vacuum of magic inside. The first

thing that happens when a high pressure space and a low pressure space meet is equalization. That would mean virtually every drop of magic in you would rush into the crystal on contact. That alone wouldn't explain Vee's excited unease. He claimed to have not a drop of magic talent in his body. So that means it must also suck up life force as well. But that didn't explain why I'm still alive and able to hold it.

No one seemed to care why. Everyone cared that I could. And nothing more. Hyria, Ba'el and now Vee were a mere sliver shy short of begging me to do this. In these last few seconds, the doubt eating away at me began to chew me up inside. Something else begged me not to. Some invisible strings were trying to pull me back. But my presence here is like a ghost. Unbound. Unnatural. I wasn't supposed to be here. I am a loophole. This crystal wasn't ever meant to return to this place. Had it ever belonged here? I felt like it did. Why did I feel that way?

The questions kept piling up.

“Now. Insert the key,” Vee gasped, the man having forgetting to breathe.

Promises ran through my head parallel to the warnings. Hyria offered what assistance she could should I perform this task for her. Ba'el said this surge of mana into the world would be a boon. Vee said doing this would turn the tide of a battle raging beyond these walls. The lives of many could be saved. Many could be doomed. They all seemed so far away as the crystal succeeded in sucking my attention toward it like a black hole. The world around me faded out. The white glow of the smooth limestone walls vanished and only the green glow mattered.

Beyond all the threats, the warnings, and the promised rewards... One thing mattered above that all. I asked the crystal. I spoke to it quietly.

“Will you show me home?”

This place is one of many. There are others. A place which kept many records. Star charts engraved onto the walls of a temple left to rot in a faraway jungle to the south. Along one of its walls lay an alien sky. Alien to this place. Familiar to me. The people who saw that sky also built this place. I was left to wonder what connection these two ruins had.

As I pondered, the crystal did not respond. OF course it wouldn't. I raised my thumb and pushed the head of the crystal down. Its tail protruded from the bottom of my clenched fist. My arm quivered as I held it aloft. I could feel the muscles in my arm twist and groan as it pulled back. Something trying to reel it back. A snap. An audible sound effect resounding inside my head as I stabbed the console and jammed the crystal into its destined slot.

And just like the key it looked like, I gave it a twist.

Vreem!

The console sprung to life. Traces of green light flowed down every groove of the console. It had the color consistency of luminescent radium: a sickly green. That color seized control of the console before spreading to the floor and up the walls until lines met at the ceiling and flashed. From both ends, the start and the finish, yellow followed next and then red. It flashed through all the colors of the rainbow in successive order. A feeling of something breaking was unmistakable. Whatever it is... It began resetting.

And then the ground began to quake.

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A new fog joined the eternal blanket which wrapped Yaleria in its eternal embrace. Count Aaron stood at its wellspring, motionless with his hands open and dangling at his sides. From his open palms a black mist billowed forth. It pooled on the ground and coiled around his feet. Those black tendrils lashed out gingerly toward Duke Malco`s knights who inched closer and closer. The rebellion's leader was trapped. Isolated from his men. That did little to dissuade the man in black juggernaut armor.

One of Malco's knights closed in behind with his spear ready let loosed his battle cry. The steel point thrust into the back of knee, a classic weak point in any armor, but the blade broke on impact. It struck true, but bent against the black iron. That spears shattering was accompanied by the sound of grinding metal, the clockwork gears hidden beneath the Mk. VI's armor chewing into the remaining half of the spear head. The knight could not pull away as his hands were locked tight and coursing with adrenaline.

From Aaron's black clad hands an object appeared. Woven from black tendrils out of thin air. Silver in sheen, but totally utilitarian in form. A simple sword with a very simple shape. No imagination or

love went into its crafting. If you could say its manifestation was crafting at all. The suit of armor clumsily spun around and the blunt of the blade cleaved straight into the knight's side. It did not stop. A torso went flying and the legs below it collapsed to the ground.

Such a hidious sight would have sent lesser men screaming in terror. But Malco's knights were warriors first and men second. Their nerves ran thin on a razor's edge, but the fury of seeing one of their own so callously cut down caused them to rush forward with an array of blades spread out in a fan.

Yet no matter how savagely and bravely they thrust them forward, the juggernaut cared not an iota. Brave blades were turned away from the blackened surface like water droplets on stone. Count Aaron materialized another identical sword in his other hand and began to gracelessly swing like a machete through overgrowth. His movements were rough and undisciplined, but they could not be stopped. They did not yield. Shields and arms raised to bar its way were shredded. No steel could match that which Aaron created from the void. One knight, two knights, three; Malco's men were cut down one by one. With not such much as a scratch on the Count's ebony hide, the knights hastily backed away.

Aaron pushed forward into the gap. His wailing battle cry shook the air with vibrating metal that finally froze over the hearts of all. But not of Malco himself. The Duke threw himself into the fray with Halazuel held high. He brought it down and clashed steel with the unknown. Both swords groaned, but the greatsword refused to break, unlike the others.

“Well, I'll be,” Aaron taunted the furious Malco. “It appears you inherited your ancestor's sword after all!”

The two noble lords broke off and returned to a parleying distance.

“I suppose I must at least recognize your claim... As the progeny of a traitor.”

“The pride you take in being one does not absolve you of shame or rightful target of scorn!”

“History will decide that. Not you. The way it is meant to be. The way it has always been!”

Both men had nothing else to say and charged forward to clash

blades once again.

Aaron's new height was staggering. He towered a little more than a head's hight taller than Malco. His jet black armor endowed him with great strength. On top of that, the armor made him extremely heavy and immobile. Yet his movements were no greater than an ordinary man's. Malco had trained his whole life to be a fighter. His strength is immense by ordinary standards. He wielded his family's greatsword with relative ease. His blows were not as mighty as Aaron's, but he knew how to fight. Something which Aaron clearly did not.

The Count's attacks were sloppy, predictable, worse than amateurish. They were appallingly bad. Almost embarrassing. But they could likewise not be stopped. As Malco ducked and weaved he soon learned the surroundings would offer no protection. One of Aaron's summoned swords cleaved right through stone wall and pillar with greatest of ease. As masonry collapsed down on top of them, the juggernaut cared not for the bricks which shattered off his helm.

Duke Malco could not match the Count blow for blow either. One weak —but solid— parry sent a tremor up Halazuel and into Malco's arm. It made his bones feel like jelly for a moment. Malco delivered a few blows which would have been lethal against any unarmored foe. To an armored man they would have rattled them and knocked them over long ago. Count Aaron weathered the strikes with an angry grunt and pushed on as if he felt no pain at all.

The battle waged on and that one detail would ultimately decide the outcome of this duel. Aaron did not tire. Sweat began to flow of the Duke's brow.

A windfall came for Malco and was carried by the wind as well. It came in the form of a flaming rock which crashed between the two duelers. It exploded in fiery shrapnel and put a pause on the combat. Both turned to watch as similar explosions rocked the icy bars squeezing down on the castle. Aaron's siege engines had started again in earnest. One of the boulders toward the end of the first volley crashed into the tip of one icicle and snapped it off. Steam erupted from the point of impact and ice showered down like shards of glass.

At the gate to Sulunaerg a battering ram slammed into the ice with relentless zealotry. Thousands of desperate mercenaries clamored to save their paycheck. Malco's men scrambled from their positions where they watched the battle take place and rush back to

their defensive positions along the wall. They hurried to rebuild the barricades the best they could as Malco kept Aaron occupied with the one weapon inside the keep which could so much as scratch his twilight armor.

Boulders of fire continued to rain down on Sulunaerg and the palisade of ice broke, cracked and disintegrated bit by bit. It had bought time, but time was not what Malco needed. He needed an upper hand.

Count Aaron drew his arm back to unleash another devastating blow, but stopped dead in its tracks. Frost bit down into the armor and caused the metal to stick and contract. It created an opening which Malco's instincts naturally took advantage of. His most powerful blow yet came crashing down from the other side. Aaron could not manoeuvre in time to deflect it in his awkward position and sparks flew as the Duke's greatsword cut deep into Aaron's shoulder. But he was immune to pain. With titan strength the giant snapped the ice off and lunged forward to deliver a counterstrike. A patch of slick black ice formed underneath the Count's lead foot a millisecond before making ground-fall. Aaron lost his balance and tumbled forward. His stumble forced one sword from his grip. That sword vanished in a puff of black smoke once released. The hiss of it evaporating got drowned out by the clatter of steel slamming into the ground. Aaron threw out the free hand to break his fall. The Duke pressed his advantage once again and pivoted to deal a hammer blow to his opponents chest as he scrambled to get back to his feet and back away.

Another shower of sparks lit of the billowing clouds of black mist which poured out from Aaron's suit of armor. Groans of anger, but not of anguish, reverberated outward. Aaron retreated out of Malco's strike zone while the Duke himself stayed put and greedily gasped for air.

Two large gashes in the black metal revealed a soft lead like texture underneath. Underneath that impenetrable outer shell appeared a malleable and soft metal unfit to be used in a suit of armor. What looked like a weakness quickly faded as the wounds closed. Malco watched in horror as his advantage vanished before his very eyes. Aaron's armor healed right in front of him.

“It's alive,” rang a voice behind Malco.

He turned around and saw the pale women herself. Frost billowed from her hands. A white mist in opposition to Mk. VI's

ceaseless clouds of black. Malco knew immediately that the freak flash freezes had been her doing. He had been so focused during the fight he hardly noticed, but it clicked now.

“Living metal. It is magic the likes I have never seen before,” Hyria elucidated.

“Leave this place!” Malco roared.

Hyria ignored his protests and strode her way beside him. The Duke did nothing physical to protest. He could have chosen to cut her down, yet the though never crossed his mind. More pressing concerns were in front of him. He understands —at least subconsciously— that his life was likely saved by her intervention. Any further protests died prematurely in his throat. Malco could do nothing more than grin and bear her presence. She foresaw that too.

“Hah! Living metal?” Count Aaron laughed defiantly. “If that were all I would not have paid so much. No. This is far more than mere —”

Aaron's red gaze narrowed and focused. Hyria straightened her back and shifted into a defensive stance as she felt something pierce right through her. Aaron remained motionless. The princess and the count exchanged a long and silent contest of wills. Hyria's red eyes dotted by white pupils refused to look away. The juggernaut the wight sized one another up. A race took place to analyze the other.

“Ha,” Aaron broke first with a huff of laughter.

Singular at first. And then it grew.

“Ha. Ha ha ha! AHAHAHA!” Aaron's steel voice creaked, cracked and rung as it burst out laughing.

He threw his head back and directed his mad laughter toward the heavens. Fireballs continued to rain down on the castle throughout. Ice splintered and stone shattered. Fire rose and dust was whipped up into a storm. The eyes of Malco's men were pulled back from their tasks as Aaron's madness demanded their attention. That buckling of the ice wall mattered little. Neither did Sulunaerg's slow disassembling around them.

“HA HA HA HA HA HA!”

Aaron's sanity wavered, but a whip crack of the helmet

snapping back into its forward position also meant a sudden and eery end to the laughter.

“Living? Living you say? That is more than I can say for you! For what else does not breath nor possesses a beating heart... Yet still walks.”

Malco's heart was next to freeze. His shame. His secret. Laid out bare. He could feel it coming. Anger is what he should have succumbed to. Its heat could not survive in the frigid recesses of his heart. Panic. That was the sole emotion which could take hold. A primal feeling. Laced with a child's helplessness. A thousand terrifying memories of the pale lady haunting him throughout his life all surfaced at once. A strong pair of knees and solid back is all that separated him from collapsing under the weight of it all. It still managed to drag the tip of his sword till it sunk into the dirt.

“It all makes so much sense now!” Aaron cried out with jubilation. “The Pale Lady. Oh, why does her white skin shine with a hint of blue? What romantic rhymes the bards did conjure in secret for our mystery mistress. All of it for nought. The Pale Lady is nought but a corpse. All this time The man who sold the future, the world, conspired with Yaleria's mortal enemy. What a farce! Look at how far the house of Malco has fallen!”

Two blades were now insufficient to embody Aaron's rage. A peacock's tail of swords fanned out from his back. Two dozen swords materializing from the aether. They spread out like angel wings behind him. A righteous angel of vengeance, in his own mind.

“And all these years I mourned the tragic loss of my dear departed sister. Helpless before fate. Now I see at last. Not lost to illness' stray arrows. MURDERED! For greed! For Lust! By a true traitor's hand. Not a mere traitor to kith or kin, but to mankind itself!”

Aaron's cold metalic voice burned with a firey passion. It echoed though the courtyard and unsettled the hearts and minds of Malco's men. Looks of disbelief were plastered on their faces. They could not believe it, but the closer they looked the more the evidence seemed palpable and the conclusion appeared inescapable.

As ground breaking as that revelation was, the ground itself rumbled greater still. The solid foundation upon which Sulunaerg had been built upon shook uncontrollably. Yaleria sat nowhere near natural fault lines. Earthquakes were totally unknown to those present. It

continued and grew more powerful the longer it went. Malco and Hyria nearly lost their footing. Only Aaron remained motionless, but not even his rage could resist being interrupted. His glowing red orb flung to and fro inside its visor trying to regain its bearings. Everyone stumbled, fell and desperately tried to grab onto something solid. Pieces of the castle shattered by the siege broke free prematurely as the castle jostled back and forth. The barrage from below also ended as the mercenaries beyond the ice and walls panicked and fell over one another. Some were thrown down the hill side as they lost their footing.

Those beyond the walls quickly discovered the source. From within the courtyard, the culprit would not be known until much of the ice palisade had crumbled under the stress of the shaking. Malco and Aaron turned to witness the outer layers of the Brightkeep and its wall begin to crumble. A shining pillar of white stone erupted from the top and left the dull stone behind like a snake shedding its skin. Slowly climbed. Inch by inch. Once the main body of this new tower freed itself, the worst of the tremors passed. But it did not stop climbing. It dared to challenge the mountains themselves in height. The tremors continued at a lower magnitude and would not relent until it reached its full height. No one watching could know when that was.

“It's over, Aaron.” Hyria boasted. “Malco's duty, your dreams... Neither can stand up fate. Neither of you can stop me from making things right. Yaleria will be whole.”

Aaron would not readily surrender. Not in the face of this unknown. Most certainly not to a monster such as herself. The fan of swords levitating behind him shuddered and vibrated. They fluttered back and forth and tested the bounds they could warp reality and the laws of nature around them. Likewise, the abyssal energy pouring forth from his hands flowed out greater than before.

A metallic roar shattered the peace and the juggernaut charged.

Chapter 103

I felt as if I were trapped in the confines of a marble coffin. A prison laid out on the back of an unsecured truck be as.it sped down a rocky and shoddy logging road. Its driver could not muster an ounce of care about the poor thing's suspension, or the innards of the poor schmuck trapped in the back without a seat-belt. That is about halfway to the kind of hell unfolding all around me.

Everything not bolted down were at the mercy of relentless tremors. My body rattled along with everything and the walls themselves looked ready to shatter. My feet were planted firmly on the ground, but the rigidly solid marble like stone served as the perfect conduit for each pulse. Every crest and trough of each narrow wavelength shot straight into my core at a machine gun's pace. I could feel the marrow in my bones churn to jelly.

None of this could be written off as a mere earthquake. Subtle movements of tectonic plates interrupted by periods of great violence could not explain this phenomenon. And while it carried on and grew worse by the second, the mad professor celebrated.

“It works!” Vee squealed with delight. “It works!”

While Vee looked about ready to start dancing I clung onto the console for dear life. All the fatigue and injuries I accumulated up until this point became painfully obvious. Duct tape solutions had not fully mended broken bones. Torn ligaments were tied back together and I had been given nothing more than am aspirin for the concussions My knees were weak and unable to hold up my weight under the relentless tremors. Nearly overdosing on magical remedies bought me time not a solution. My body slowly degenerated back to its crippled state. I had no idea how much time I had, but it could not be long.

Through the marble slab I used as support I could feel it warming like a server booting up. There were no disks or moving parts so far as I could tell, yet I could feel it was coming alive. Its display of strange high-relief runes shone brighter than before with a hundred LED like lights.

“Over ten thousand years and it works!” Vee screamed as he threw his head back crowed toward the heavens.

A switch flipped somewhere inside Vee's head. His emotionless facade had been consumed by a sort of inner child. Two dark fish-like eyes darted to and fro in a vain attempt to absorb every detail. The

mad scientist's curiosity is gluttonous. Insatiable. Vee was like a starving man who had spent his life in the desert and had seen the ocean for the first time in his life. He told me how much the world bored him, but I saw none of that now. Now bore witness to the wonders his mind could not comprehend and could not be happier.

There is so very little left of that gaunt skeleton left. This psychopathic madman made me long for those Lecter levels of creep in the past. Those unsettling pricks on the back of my neck were preferable to this abject terror. I cried out in a plea for a return to sanity.

“This isn't what happened before!” I shouted over the din. “What the fuck is going on?”

It was a vain attempt to snap Vee back to reality. He opted to busy himself by tracing his fingers across the surface of the console. The whole setup happened to fan out like a pipe organ's keys. A thousand thoughts of flight and fancy danced before him and what occurred around him were as trivial as next Tuesday's breakfast menu. An alien language spread across the surface on the console consumed him. There lay an endless array of possibilities.

“Don't even think about it!” I screamed in protest. “You don't know what it's capable of.”

“There you are wrong, Mr. Laven. I do know. I know it can do anything.”

When he said anything what I heard was nothing natural. I watched, and felt, as the pearly white room vibrated. A sensation which disorientated the senses and confounded reason. An utterly alien sensation a couple orders of magnitude worse than those before it. Yet... I could not shake this feeling was not totally unfamiliar.

The room had its own vector and velocity. We were heading up, as if in an elevator. No matter the violence being inflicted on this room, the coffin remained absolutely impervious to harm. A deafening screech of grinding stone demonstrated that it was not by a lack of trying. That would suggest that hideous grinding noise must be the surrounding stone being pulverized by this coffin's unstoppable ascent. Nothing else makes a noise like it.

“It is a marvel beyond mere mortals,” Vee elucidated. “A tool to challenge to will of gods. For what is a tool's true purpose, but to create another instrument greater than itself? Should that continue into

posterity, the natural result in wonders beyond your wildest imagination."

"And did you stop and think about why this thing was buried? You were telling me not long ago about all the death and destruction this tool caused."

"If the gods are offended by this transgression then let them strike it down."

"Yeah, that's how I planned to spend me afternoon. Right after running through a deadly gauntlet and getting my bones crushed by a drugged up gladiator I wanted to place myself right at the centre of some divine intervention!"

"Not even the gods could challenge the Babel system's defensive matrix," Vee said, trying to iron out my evident distress. "Even unto its final hour Man had to surrender Babel over to those agents of the divine. Brute force from the outside was futile. Surrender, or guile and trickery were the only weaknesses of Babel."

"If that's true why would it still exist?"

"Who knows?"

Vee shrugged and I did not take it as a good sign where things were going. We weren't just playing with fire. What Vee is doing was playing with gasoline. Fun and games—as well as toxic—up until you stray too close to a spark or open flame.

"If you are well read, if you are well traveled, you will have realized that this monolithic Empire is anything but homogenous. There is division within the Church itself. Animism, shamanism and paganism persist on the boarders of the Empire's influence. In spite of its efforts to stamp it out. And depending on who you ask, the myth is differs. Yet the story of Babel exists in them all. Such is the greatness of it... and the trauma of its collapse. A few will claim the gods' sealing of Babel also weakened their existence to this plane. That the more they buried Babel the more they dug their own graves. Some will say that many gods were lost in the fight against the great beasts and the denizens of Pandemonium. Others will say they never existed in the first place. That the Almighty was the only god to have ever existed. Who is right? We will likely never know. I doubt that the Lord of Monsters knows herself. And no one has heard the voice of the Almighty in nearly a thousand years... But that is all inconsequential for today. What fascinating tale it weaves is the consequences of its

presence... Or in the case you may be familiar with—their absence. I know of one and you should as well. A civilization whose bleached bones roast under the Tyrant Sun."

My heart thumped once and it thumped hard.

"What did you—"

"No need to hold cards so close to your chest, Mr. Laven. You are but a minor whisper on the wind. One voice lost in a litany of other tales. I will, however, admit yours is a particularly shrill one. I must berate myself nonetheless. To take a salamander with you into that accursed place... What a simple solution to an insurmountable problem. Thousands of years worth of folklore tell tales foolish treasure seekers delving into the desert who never return. Of course the scorching heat and chill of the night would affect neither of you. I, and others, must chastise ourselves for such an oversight... But, as they say, to the brave goes the spoils."

"How about you spit it out already? Or is being as cryptic as possible a requirement for that secret society of yours?"

"Think, Mr. Laven. How does life spring from a barren wasteland? Northwards lay nothing except than frigid tundra with barely a spark of civilization to be seen. Vast salt plains make up the wast still the ocean. To the west lay mountain ranges isolating it from the bounty of more hospitable lands. Toward the south is where life recovers so gradually. And only the most desperate of life forms would dare call it home. Rainfall measured over decades, not months. A place molded by an alien culture, a colony of another people whose origin is a thousand leagues away. And all of that scrubbed away with the subtraction of one vital element."

Something stolen. The gears in my head turned and recalled a conversation from within a fantastical place. An ephemeral memory which was hard to visual and pin down. Mu own voice recoiled and hushed into a murmur amongst the grinding stone.

"...A crystal."

Robbed from the treasury of that place's royal family. Greedy viscounts who could not have known better. A group of men who betrayed their liege and foolishly handed over the beating heart of their kingdom to a vicious and vindictive god.

"Yet another ancient mystery lost," Vee shrugged.

Our conversation had taken turn to Susan's old haunt. A forgotten kingdom washed away under thousands of years of cursed winds. A strange otherworldly force which eroded everything. Not solely the physical remains, but the spiritual ones as well. An oppressive curse scouring it of all life. It did appear to be almost alien in its placement. A sub-tropical Nile river civilization a three or four thousand more kilometers north of where it should be.

With a flick of Vee's wrist, the console sprung to life a once more. It shone a brighter hue than before. An audible hum was let loose and stone beneath the console began shifting. I watched as it rose upward.

“Then you are saying that everything which is Yaleria is tied to all this ancient magic mumbo-jumbo?”

“That lost kingdom would have been nothing more than a great vast salt plain without that mumbo-jumbo. The remnants of a time when the sea levels were much higher. Yaleria's current state of affairs is a result of Babel being trapped in a latent state. Death. Stagnation. An endless swamp. My conjecture is that the Bright Wall itself has interfered with proper drainage of these lands for centuries. In addition to letting necrotic magic build up to alarming levels. Casually being let loose in bursts. Likely the cause for the regular invasions of the undead.”

“And something going haywire with it resulted in that civil war.”

“Which is why, I assume, you were tasked with opening the flood gates... A temporary solution. A solution which lacks ambition. “Vee flashed a mischievous smile, “Why go through all the trouble of stealing the milk when you can take cow?”

Vee knew this would happen. He had to. There was this new twisted of ecstasy plastered onto his face. Yet I could do nothing more than grit my teeth in anger and hold on tight. A lot of my anger was directed inward. I should not have fallen for it, but thinking that I could do something to help everyone else and stop all this bloodshed got the better of me. Vee exploited that weakness and forced me to act prematurely.

“You wished for the reservoir of mana trapped beneath the inactive tower to be released. Am I mistaken? Vee inquired.

I did not respond. My gloomy and wide eyed expression must have said it all for me. Vee smiled at his vindication and continued.

“And that would provide the necessary fuel for that dead princess' intervention. To stop my employer's hostile takeover of this realm. I do not doubt the possibility. All that mana could flood out across Yaleria in nearly an instant.”

“And I take it that's what the tunnels and caverns are all about?” I posited.

“Yes,” Vee nodded enthusiastically. “So you did take notice. What you saw was the lattice network. Ancient support tunnels. Magic circles lines carved beneath the surface. Well beneath the bedrock of Greater Yaleria—”

That explains a lot. It explained all those strange glyphs, and etchings across the walls that looked similar to electrical circuits. Perhaps this mana stuff operated under some similar principle. That lich wizard awakened when enough of it became present. Princess Hyria and her court magician could no doubt muster a lot more in order to help Duke Malco. Would it be enough to stop Count Aaron in his tracks? That is the sole thing that kept me going. The sooner I could put a stop to this petty war the better.

“—Yet this pillar, a part of a greater whole, can offer so much more.”

While Vee babbled on, the surround-sound grinding ceased. It very suddenly ceased. My ears were elated as it subsided into an ever weakening roar beneath my feet. I checked for blood and was relieved to find they were merely suffering from some minor barotrauma... On second thought that brought up a whole new list of concerns.

“Ah,” Vee sighed as he twisted his head around to soak in the stimuli. “We have cleared the seal. Excellent. Most excellent.”

Ignoring my protests, the professor mashed his fingers onto the console's keys. The consequences of his meddling were immediate. A pulse through the tower. One with an opposing polarity to the one trying to shake it to pieces. And then there was a light. Several bursts of sunlight to be precise. Natural light poured in through dozens of tiny fractures.

Vee raised his arms into the air and moved them like a maestro in sync with the impregnable marble superstructure's disjointment. A

few cracks multiplied into many. Those few increased exponentially till the whole interior was awash with light. My eyes stung as if it had been years since I last saw the sun.

Like petals of a giant flower, the lily white marble room's walls unfurled. There were no moving parts nor mechanism to explain it. It moved as if the stone were a living, breathing thing. But its opening invited not only the sun and fresh—bitterly cold—air, but hundreds of kilograms of rocky debris and dust which had ridden high up into the sky with us.

Intermittent between those clouds of debris was the first of the wonder's Vee spoke of. Yaleria's low hanging clouds were within reach. Low hanging stratus clouds a mere two kilometres above the surface... But we were only a few hundred meters away. We've already risen as high as any skyscraper.

A bitter chill from the thinning atmosphere bit at my skin and nipped at the tip of my nose. A balmy and overcast early summer day quickly felt like a bitter fall and then a cruel winter. Yet it was the wind chill itself which could do me in. High altitude winds made it feel like minus double digits. As frail as my mortal body was my concerns were with the tower itself. Building this high is suicidal.

“It all should come tumbling down, shouldn't it?” Vee said, completing my thought aloud. “But why doesn't it? It does not appear thick enough to survive natural forces working upon it, correct? Yet here it rises. Here it was and is now again. A monument in defiance of the gods themselves.”

The console separated from the monotonous white marble into its own platform. Above it hung the only remaining shelter. For only above the console had the marble ceiling not peeled away. It stood resolute against the last rain of debris, meanwhile, I could not stop myself from shrinking under the cacophony. Nor could I stop myself from hacking and wheezing as the last cloud of pulverized stone was whisked away into the Yalerian sky.

And as if it read my mind, the perimeter of the platform saw an arrangement of stone rise out of the floor. It bore a pattern reminiscent of a stone hedge.

“Magnificent!” Vee howled. “Soaring among the clouds themselves. To think the ancients were not writing in hyperbole... Truly astounding. Even the gods themselves would have nothing to hide

behind. There is naught but the heavens above!”

Things had gotten out of hand. There were things happening now that seemed to have nothing to do with what Vee was doing. I might dare claim that this place was coming alive. Its stones moved in such an organic way that I had a hard time banishing that stray through. A retching gut feeling in the pit of my stomach warning me. That feeling had yet to let me down. I had to make a habit of trusting it more. I'd start by trying to bring a stop this madness.

“Vee, this has gone too far. You don't know what the hell you are doing,” I protested while trying to pull myself back onto my feet. “You are messing with shit you don't understand!”

I was surely a pitiful sight. Clinging and dragging myself up an axillary console with my knees still numb and buckling. None of that concerned me at the moment. There was only one voice of caution and reason this high up in the sky.

“Maybe I don't understand much, hell, I might not understand a single damn thing going on right now... But I know damn well the damage that's been done. We've pushed through at least two dozen stories of solid stone. And now we're still going up? You of all people should be able to figure out what kind of damage that has done to the Bright Keep.”

“So what?” Vee said, casually dismissing off my anger.

“So what?” So WHAT?”

My fury redoubled, but he didn't pay my enraged visage any mind. There is a big difference between merely observing a phenomenon and actively seeking to provoke it. And now Vee admitted that is exactly what he is doing. And to make matters worse, the mad man confessed he had no idea what he is doing.

“Come now, Mr. Laven. You may find it shocking, but the affairs of this world are run by those who know less than you do. It is hardly wisdom that turns the wheels of history. That right belongs to the bold! So do not falter now.”

“I would not have done a thing had I known you were going to raise ancient monoliths!”

“As I suspected,” Vee sighed. “And that is why my hand was forced. Had I merely stood by and observed you very well have let this

historic opportunity pass us by."

"You bastard," I hissed.

"I pegged as someone more self-aware than this. This is a sad display. Do not disappoint me again so soon. Not when we're so close to witnessing one of the great wonders of the ancient world in all its glory. We shall turn the page and write the next chapter of this world with our own hands!"

"And we stopped being on the same page after knocking over that throne. I can't say we are reading the same god damn book anymore."

Nothing at the Lich's tomb could have prepared me for this. It had been nothing more than a fancy light show. A bunch of frivolous fanfare for a seal breaking. It released a reservoir of magic power dammed up under Yaleria. It didn't cause the earth to be swallowed up. No cataclysmic events tore the realm asunder. All that effort for completing that green crystalline key. Yet neither the princess nor her sorceress warned me something like this could happen. I believe they would have warned me.

Now Vee has hijacked this device. Once I had played my part, the professor brushed me aside. He admitted himself that he intended for this to happen from the start. Vee lied to me. Used me. Saved my life for no other reason than to threaten the whole world for a bite out of the forbidden fruit. The only reason I was still alive is due to his desire to have a witness. There is I nothing I could do but watch and protest.

Vee's expression hardened when he looked back toward me. He probably sensed the incredible amount of anger pouring out from my eyes. I could no longer contain it. He studied my face for a moment and frowned.

"The Eternal Cycle. Does the phrase mean nothing to you, Mr. Laven?"

"Can't say it does," I spat.

"Not too surprising. The Church has gone out of its way to make people forget it. They desire to put up the illusion of its immortality. Priests and prophets and will tell you of foretold events. Visions granted to them from divine sources. Poppycock. All of it. You may speak to scholars, but their histories are so full of holes that if they

were sails not even a hurricane would carry them. No. No no no no no Those charlatans merely realized that history repeats itself. They are attuned to the signs of the wheel turning. And soon it will enter its third full revolution—”

Another sinister grin from the man.

“—centuries ahead of schedule.”

Now I'm a hundred percent convinced the man is insane. There's no way he was completely there. Without those seemingly magic-like powers of his, the man would be trapped in the confines of a padded room... Or in this world, the fate would likely be burnt at the stake.

“There will be panic. Not in the streets, of course, but at the tables of power. A single tower rising is an ill omen.”

The color drained from my face as I spoke, “Half an hour ago you were telling me that Babel is the reason why Canaan was destroyed.”

Something had gone wrong with Babel all those years ago. Three beasts emerged that annihilated everything. I had my doubts something like that would happen again, what with monsters as they are, but now its confirmed that's not the only disaster it can cause. We're talking about extinction level events here. Something reserved for when a comet makes impact.

“Ohohoho, the world is more resilient than you give it credit for... But I will confess that Babel has a tendency to make entire civilizations... Disappear.”

“So you know full well what this thing can do—and you still want to mess with it!?”

“Of course!” Vee shouted with delight. “Kingdoms, cultures and entire peoples come and go, but the truth always remains the same.” His voice grew dire as he leveled his eyes and without a hint of remorse proclaimed, “There's no price too high I would not pay to know it.”

Not for a single second did the consequences of his actions register. All that mattered to him was the mystery to unravel. Damned be those who get caught in the crossfire.

“Canaan vanished, and was forgotten, but not in vain. Despite cursing himself as he reached up to grab hold of the sun—man tasted godhood. Any suffering from discovering that truth, even if only in that brief before destruction, was worth it. To hold the whole cosmos in your hand... What a euphoria it must have been. The pettiness of the material downfall pales in comparison. Not even creating his own demons was sufficient punishment for treading into domains he was never meant venture within.

Now he had a dopy expression of someone high on narcotics. His own vivid imagination flooding his system with nearly enough dopamine to cause an overdose. Yet he just as quickly slipped back into a lucid state. I was having a hard time following Vee. He began to go further off the deep end the further we continued to shoot upward toward the sky. He appeared disjointed and unable to focus on any one topic for long. Not only did I have to distill what came out of his mouth on the fly, but I had to use half digested banter to translate the new.

I could do nothing more than hold on for dear life and gape in horror.

As we conversed Babel's flowering bud completed its transmogrification and shuddered to a sudden stop. The tower jostled underneath my feet as our upward acceleration abruptly stopped. Its crown crested the clouds and I could see the top of clouds in every direction. Yet I could not find their silver linings.

We were not talking in mere meters anymore. This was to be measured in kilometers. I would wager four at the very least. More than double that of the tallest I knew as possible. And those were made of concrete and steel. Not stone. In the distance I could spy the summits of mountains peeking out from beneath the clouds. Were it not for the clouds I could have very well witnessed the curvature of the planet.

“And bless their souls at the Church of the Almighty. They realized this as well. Albeit only in part. The early Church spent its infancy faced with an old dilemma. With the previous Monster Lord died it weathered an existential crisis. What purpose would it serve in the peace they had won? Ever since the great three beasts were vanquished, and after the death of each Monster Lord thereafter, man has stumbled during the advent of the next disaster. Although united, the same descent into civil war occurred. Time and time again. Camaraderie between men erodes and they regress to their baser

natures. Never learning that there will always be another Monster Lord to claw its way out from Hell. But this Church... This one sought to not make the same mistake. They would keep mankind united at any cost. So too would they monopolize its secrets. Anything to keep that Eternal Cycle from turning."

"And next you're going to tell me—"

"That the unforeseen occurred nonetheless?" Vee said as he flashed a grin. "Empires rise and fall in cycles. Yet in the face of its own inevitable extinction, the Empire and the Church of the Almighty sought to stave off this inevitability. It had an entire world to explore and exploit. Endless room for growth and lost lands to conquer. And it did so under an iron fist. All motions of independence and reestablished of lost kingdoms had to crushed utterly. And in its arrogance knew itself by no other name than THE Empire. And it worked until about two centuries ago. The first written records of strange new monsters began to appear. Donning a human mask and licentious womanly forms. Treated as curiosity's at first. Sirens singing sailors into shipwrecks were nothing new. It was a little over a century ago when their complacency would cost them. The Sixty Year War. A mass insurgency rotting away at the Empire from within. An enemy using a weapon which The Empire had not prepared itself for."

"What in the hell does that have to do with here and now?"

"It's all a threat to the Eternal Cycle. Both the machinations of man and monster. Both defying the destiny laid out before it. An Empire which wishes to live forever. And a life form seeking redemption. A hijacking of natural processes. A rejection of their base natures. And if history is thrown off its rails what purpose do the men with white collars serve? What comes of their God's promises failing to come into fruition? Servitude into posterity, or a selfish flash of freedom. What is the best for mankind?"

"How about neither?" I said in defiance.

His smile faded away. Vee leveled his eyes and glared at me with utmost seriousness.

"Should this cycle break, the old mysteries shall fade away. The eternal endeavor of rediscovering hidden knowledge is sole reason Ouroboros exists. Millennia of pain and suffering to preserve the secret to godhood... Thrown away. I, for one, cannot abide it. Ouroboros', my own pursuit of truth and knowledge will not be stopped.

No matter the content. No matter the consequences. I care not for Man nor Monster."

Vee leaned in and made the skin on the back of my neck crawl. I threw back at him my utmost disdain, but was careful to not let the black of his eyes sink their fangs in me.

"Are we on the same page now, Mr. Laven?"

After being in suspended animation, the heartbeat in my chest returned. Blood flowed through my veins and it brought colour back to my cheeks. A deep crimson red. A hot burning rogue that swelled with anger. My eyes nearly felt as if they were bulging out from their sockets. The taste of iron lay thick in my mouth. A fury smouldered in my soul.

My body felt like it could freeze at any moment as it shivered. Such was the altitude we were now parlaying at. How I wish I could have taken the time to marvel at the view, but there was something hideous I had to give my full attention to. Nothing more than latent anger kept my joints from freezing over and locking up. I could feel my knees weakening and my stomach churn anew with the vertigo from looking down at the ground below. Yet with the rumbling now gone I could at last muster the strength to stand upright.

"And you'd do all of that—all of this—untold destruction... Just so that YOU can know for one second what godhood is?" I roared. "Unimaginable destruction is something anything, anyone, can do. That's not godhood!"

"I said I once dabbled in the mysteries of lightning, did I not?" Vee said so very nonchalantly. "Its destructive power was a tertiary focus of mine—"

He could not be bothered to carry on our conversation anymore. All the flashing lights and a new pattern of light flicking on the console drew in Vee's gaze like a black hole. His hands moved at lightning speed across the runes scattered across the console. He appeared to me someone who was working on the device with trial and error. The worst thing you could do with something you do not comprehend what it is and what it can do.

I could no longer stand idly by. I had the strength back in my legs, so I lunged and grabbed hold of Vee's wrist. There was a jolt of static shock, but it offered no more resistance than an ordinary door knob above a shag carpet. A firm yank and I pulled him off the

console. It felt no different from grabbing a skeleton. He had no weight to him at all. There wasn't a hint of resistance despite the visual attempt to do so. I lifted his arm high up into the air which pulled his whole body away from the console. His eyes went wide with astonishment. Perhaps it never occurred to him that I would get physical. Maybe it was due to him believing I couldn't. He couldn't do much with my hand clamped down around the wrist device hidden underneath his sleeve.

“Secondary to what?” I said menacingly.

What I expected out of such a weakling was tacit compliance, but instead I got fury. A litany of abuse poured out from his pale and gangly frame.

“GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME!”

The eccentric, but typically calm and collected, professor began to trash about in my grip. His eyes went wide with animalistic fury as he clawed in vain with his other hand at my own. Were he flexible enough he might have tried biting me. I stood there dumbfounded. A few moments past before it occurred to me what the cause might be. Haphephobia: the fear of being touched.

When my body was broken on the ground before him earlier, the man had done nothing to gauge my injuries. He splashed some alchemical water on me as if such a simple task were a chore. His physique is particularly frail, so there is some logical reason to fear being manhandled like this. Yet this here had degenerated into hysterics. Vee had yet to say another intelligible word after demanding I let him free.

He would not be able to put up any sort of resistance without his magic devices. Perhaps that static shock would have normally been sufficient to deter others, but it had little effect on me; the same with all the other magic phenomenon. With that knowledge in mind I confidently reached out to the crux of this whole disaster. I caught the green crystal key in my grip. In my anger I thought I could put a halt to the madness with one more yank. But as my fingers grazed past the anhydrous key it rejected me. Violently.

A pulse of green lightning leaped out and bit me on the hand. It assaulted the nerves in my arm which caused it to reflexively jerk backward. It throbbed and stung as if I had slept on it for an entire night and threw me off balance. I stumbled backwards and then

lurched forward in a misguided attempt to keep myself from falling flat on my back. My hands slammed into the cold hard marble and my knees followed suit.

Something befuddled my senses. I could see flickers of green lightning leap off my bare skin. An electrical shock of some sorts forced my whole nervous system to reboot. From the tips to my fingers ,to the end of my toes, a painful tingling caused my muscles to seize up. My throbbing heart fluttered as a counter-current coursing though me threatened to stop it beating altogether.

Of course this meant that I had lost my grip on Vee. I was quickly reminded when a leather sole impacted against my back. There wasn't enough strength in my arms to hold myself. My arms gave way and my face slammed into the white marble. The next blow came from the tip of a boot as it collided with my rib cage.

“Don't. Ever. Touch. ME!” Vee shouted.

Each word came with its own boot to my torso. That last one hit side of my head and set off the fireworks. I tried to get back onto my feet, but one last blow sent me spiraling back down to the ground. It was more of a push than a kick and it sent me over the edge of the platform and tumbling down the stairs. Thankfully Vee could not muster the strength to send me down to the bottom. I came to a stop about halfway down.

Every breath I now tried to take brought about another stabbing pain on the left side of my chest. Vee had managed to fracture at least one of my ribs. I tenderly nursed the side of my torso and felt for the injuries beneath the swelling welts. A hissing seethe escaped my lips each time I touched it, but at least I could feel there was nothing broken through. Eventually the pain subsided and my vision and hearing returned. Vee's furious red faced expression atop the platform above me is what greeted me.

He was hoarse of breath and on the verge of hyperventilating. Yet as he sucked in more of the cool high altitude air, the look on his face showed his usual calm returning. A quick readjustment of his coat and he turned his back on me. No doubt returning to the console.

“I am thoroughly disappointed,” Vee raged. “And here I held onto a sliver of hope that you could be brought to see reason. Maybe then you would have realized that it is far too late to turn back now.”

Witnessing the look on his face could have left anyone with that

impression. Yet I could not muster a retort. My lungs refused to fill with enough air to raise my voice to anything more than a murmur.

"...Why?" I gasped as rolled about in a vain.

"Why? Because mana is child's play!" Vee turned his head and shouted. "If Babel were a mere collection of conduits for magic they would hardly be anything of note. No. That is not it."

I could hear the hum of the console intensify greater than it had before. A strange new shudder caused yet another shiver throughout the tower. Another seal faded away. It kept happening one after another.

"My quest for truth had me dissect the secrets of lightning: The gods' flame. A symbol of their anger. A manifestation of their power on this material plane. Because which grants life is no different from that which taketh it away."

All the splendor of the world lay below me. Down the stairs, across the lower platform and beyond the Stonehenge barrier the horizon waited. A sea of clouds with a mountain range rising up above them far to the east. Below that was the Brightwall snaking through the marshland of Yaleria like a miniature Great Wall. The way the sun glistened off those clouds had an almost calming effect. But now those clouds were beginning to turn black. It wasn't a new weather system blowing in from the west. No new rain bloated storm from the sea. All those pristine white clouds suddenly turned.

"And give life... That is what I desired. Just as you said yourself. True power lies not in destruction, but in creation. Yet every act a human takes destroys. An enviable march toward entropy. He feeds himself by taking life. He builds a house by destroying trees. Fire, god's gift to man, is not true creation. Bashing two rocks together until dry tinder burns to ashes. Man creates nothing. He can only destroy. And I sought to overcome that."

My head was clear enough to take a swing at what Vee is talking about. With the creation of those golems. All those living suits of armor were no doubt his doing and done all in the name of that goal. And something else he no doubt created. That abomination which I spied following him around long ago.

"And that's where your Patches came from. An artificial human being—"

“Stitched together from corpses.”

Like a real Dr. Frankenstein. That makes all the lightning make sense. But I could do nothing else but shake my head at the thought of a man actually trying to make such a thing happen. Yet I shouldn't be so surprised. This place was chock full of weird reality bending nonsense.

“Regardless—each experiment was a failure. No matter how many times I performed it, or which parts I used, the result was always the same. More monsters. Initially mindless, slow to adapt, but relentless in maturing. And always female... No matter the parts.”

Wait. Hold on. Is he saying there are more than one Patches? My heart sank as the shadow of some insidious truth began to stir in the back of my mind. I did not want to face it, but at the same time I could not turn away. Nor could I ever hope to run away. A fresh wind blew, but there was an eerie silence which hushed it immediately after.

“I was not so skilled at first and had to cobble Patches' brain together from different donors. It has left her with a rather shattered psyche. She is a testament to the idea of beginners luck,” Vee chuckled softly. “Yet she served as functioning prototype.”

A prototype. The first of many should the first succeed. Another spike through my heart. A subtle twist of hidden in his words left me more disturbed than before. It begged me to ask a single question. One I knew in my heart that I did not want answered.

“...Where did you get your parts.”

“An Empire in turmoil provides many raw materials. War leaves many casualties as does persecution. I had more difficulty chasing storms than misery.”

My knuckles went white from the clenching of my fists. My body involuntarily spasmed due to the pain, but I kept my lips shut tight. But there could be no doubts my body began to shake with something else other than pain. Something woven in between what Vee had said began to gnaw at me. He had mentioned that the other Mks III and IV were containment shells gone horribly wrong. Women wearing steel armor. Yet they were the armor itself. Steel containers rather that took on the form of humans. Human women. They were meant to be containment for abyssal energy. Abyssal energy he got from—

The corner of my lip began to tic, “No... You didn't.”

“The Monster Lord doth waste great potential,” Vee declared, heartlessly and with a tinge of jealousy. “I deigned I could use it better.”

“You created life—and then you stole it for yourself...”

“Unlife, Mr. Laven. Failures. Bastardizations of life. And the Mk.2s were hardly an improvement over the Mk.Is. They merely achieved a semblance of sentience earlier than previous attempts. And as such, they became a hassle and a liability that much sooner. But all was not lost. I re-purposed them once isolating that which made them —them. Waste not want not and all that. Yet still no matter how hard I tried I could not properly isolate the abyssal energy. As if it had a mind of its own. Which is why I could not let the opportunities Babel brings pass me by. If the theories I have heard are correct it is more than a great magic conduit. It is the nexus. The epicenter. The genesis of abyssal energy itself.”

“You sick son of a bitch!”

“And when man first tasted the power of light's shadow, opposite but equal to creation itself, they could not be stopped. I defy the gods. I defy the cowardice of men! God gifted fire to man, but it was lightning he stole for himself!”

And there came the light show. All those roiling dark clouds flickered to life. A symphony of thunderclaps arched across the sky. The tower itself sat at the eye of the storm and acted as if it were an orchestration of the right hand rule. Like iron filings the clouds formed concentric circles and danced merrily around the tower. Upwards came the energy from out of the earth. I could actually see the pale blue winds dance and flutter about. Mana was concentrating to the point where it is visible with the unaided eye. It mirrored the clouds and swirled about in field lines that were spiraling inwards.

A giant magic circle. Its scope and scale unlike anything I had bore witness to before. And that sabbath had put together a particularly impressive one.

“More. More power! Ancient ones show me the way!” Vee laughed manically.

He threw his hands into the air, danced around in circles and then slammed his hands back into the console. Babel obeyed his commands and from the canopy above another spire rose higher into

sky. It had all the markings of a radio spire. I had little doubt it served as more than the symbolic spear point aimed toward the heavens. No sooner than that thought crossed my mind, the extra hundred meters of white marble gathered all the electricity onto its self. A giant lightning rod. At least I assumed it was electricity and lightning. I could no longer be sure because it served as a void where the blue winds of mana fell into.

An unfathomable amount of energy kept collapsing into a single point in space until it actually took on physical properties. A giant ball of blue plasma. It shone like a disco ball and will-o'-the-wisps of mana orbited like electrons around an atom's nucleus. Except that so much of it gathered until it formed a solid sphere.

And while the thunder never ceased, or Vee's rantings and raving abated, that blue sphere turned to white and then black. Not a straight jet-black. It had a sheen of purple to it as well. With that garish purple sphere can a low soul shattering screech. No different from a heated nail hammered in one ear and out through the other. I could feel it throbbing inside my head. All attempts to cover my ears were futile. Meanwhile, Vee gawked at the dancing wavelengths on his wrist mounted device. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he marveled at the data streaming in. He appeared oblivious to the noise.

It throbbed like a heart. Its birthing cries were inhuman. I watched as it grew from the size of an apple to the size of a basketball. It did not reach its limit until it reached three meters in diameter. Soon I realized that it was not the sphere itself which made the noise. No one could explain away the mind bending wail that way. It was everything else which was screaming. Reality itself warped and protested around that purple glowing sphere. It was abyssal energy. Pure abyssal energy. The supposed shadow to light. It is anti-creation.

“More! I need more,” Vee sang at the top of his lungs. “Just a little more data. Show me the secret to how it is done!”

“Vee!” I screamed in turn.

But I accomplished nothing more than filling my lungs with ozone. No protest of mine would reach him and it left me feeling lightheaded. My lungs convulsed and I went into a coughing fit.

This burning sensation in my lungs would soon be secondary to the terrifying sight of a crack running along the abyssal sphere. Worse than cracking glass, the destabilization of the plasma sent out a new

invigorated banshee-like squeal. Whatever power was going into this thing had reached critical mass. This sphere would not hold together much longer!

Yet I could not speak another word in this polluted air.

A flash of light erupted from a crack in its side. It sputtered a few times but then shot upward toward the sky as a giant ray. A purple beam which shot up toward space. I wish I could have unheard that horrible sound it made as the very air in its path was violently destroyed. A trail of fire was left in its wake. We were fortunate it did not set the atmosphere itself on fire.

That release drained the size of the sphere, but only marginally. And it didn't take more than ten seconds before it began expanding again. Large in part to Vee's continued meddling with the controls. I could hear the sound of his fingers tap across the lit display in earnest. The sphere had no time to recover before it swelled once more and the cracks along its surface as it neared its critical mass returned. But this time it was expanding faster than before. It grew larger than last time before it would inevitability shatter.

“VEE!” I croaked in pain in spite of the ozone rich air.

He did not heed my call. A screech much worse than the last rocked reality. The purplish sphere broke in half like an egg and its contents vented. It did not take much of an opening and the small fracture was no doubt worse than large one, or many. A miniature quasar of energy, whatever it was, screamed across the sky. This time it came out horizontally. It raked across the clouds which went beyond evaporation into annihilation. The skies parted as a laser zoomed across my field of vision. It covered the breast of the eastern horizon and not even the mountain looming above the clouds could stop it. It passed through it as if it were never there to begin with.

The abyssal sphere entered a dormant state at last. It spun in place atop the spire and hummed peacefully. That brain rattling din also stopped. I could also breathe again. My sinuses were clear of ozone, and while my lungs still stung, the damage being done to them stopped. Now there was but an eerie silence. Replaced by an eerie sight.

About fifty kilometers in the distance the eastern mountain which capped the Brightwall rose upward into the sky. Legends suggested the gods raised it and its twin brother in the west to close off

the Shadelands to the north. Except I could not say it was its brother's twin any longer. From our vantage point I could see it change color. A hundred fault lines wove their way across the mountain. It looked like trails of molten rock.

I heard a pop and fizzle erupt behind me. It was so loud and sudden that my head turned involuntarily toward it. There stood Vee, gazing toward the same mountain as me. He examined the device on his wrist with a stone faced expression. The one which displayed the wavelength which had exploded. I suppose I ought to say he is now examining its remains. Perhaps after overloading?

When I looked back there were now fires consuming the entire mountain and its glacial cap evaporated in mere seconds. Anything on or near it would have died immediately in all that steam. That terrifying thought was quickly pushed to the back burner. Just as the sphere had, the mountain began to radiate beams of light from what looked like cracks in its surface.

"Oh god," were the words which fumbled out of my slackened jaw.

Something boiled inside all the rock and could no longer be contained. One ray of light was followed by two more than eight. A sense of dread shut my eyes on reflex. My arm threw itself across my face immediately afterword. There is not as much darkness as I would have thought. My entire field of vision went bleach white and the whole world went deaf.

Chapter 104

Once the great bulwark against death and decay, the city of Mornurg lies at the mercy of a monolith from ancient times. It is a relic from an age before written history. It is a myth which had been twisted through generations of oral tradition before haunting the written word. Mornurg's ancient walls had survived the trials of time and avoided becoming a quarry, yet its existence is a mere babe compared to the Methuselah aged Babel.

The gods themselves tried to bury long ago in the desperate hope that mortals would forget. The peoples of the world surrounded it with tales of demons and catastrophe. All in the vain hope that no one would dare seek them out. Today was not the first failure. Many had dared to dabble in their mysteries throughout history. On each occasion terrifying powers rocked the world. But for the first in over two-thousand years one of Babel's pillars had managed to break free from its earthen prison.

Paltry are the wars and the squabbles of mortal men to heaven and hell. Their lives rarely passed a hundred years and their lineages could only dream of persisting for one thousand. So too for their great works, and like a god to a man, Babel lorded over Mornug. No one present could fathom it. The pillar of Babel, resurrected and risen high into the heavens, had many tales. In all of them, however, it is recognized as the first of man's great follies. No page, not within the Church's scripture, could peel away the enigma laying behind its surface.

Its pristine ivory exterior was a beautiful sight to behold, the way the sun glistened off its nigh mirror sheen is itself a wonder all on its own. Yet images of white never conveyed purity to the people of Yaleria. Thoughts of bone dominated the minds of those who watched on with trepidation and despair. That which is white and moves can be but two things to a Yalerian: Winter snow and the dead who have refused to die.

If the people watching now knew the powers laying in wait, the gaping onlookers would have started their doomed efforts to flee long ago.

And so the captive peoples of Mornurg crooked their necks in lock step with the myriad of soldiers and mercenaries. Anyone a hundred of leagues away could look up and watch as it climbed ever higher into the daytime sky. There were only three pairs of eyes it

could not pull away. Duke Malco, Count Aaron and the undead princess Hyria continued their melee in the Sulunaerg's mustering fields.

Count Aaron's twilight black suit of armour girded him behind an impenetrable hide of some new and strange alloy. His movements were quick and far beyond what the soft man could have mustered days before. So too was his strength like that of a giant and made it clear as day that the suit had been enchanted in some way. Worst of all were the weapons at its disposal. Through some strange magics Aaron could summon weapons at his leisure. It mattered not how many of them shattered, or how many were disarmed. Several more were ready to take their place, all arrayed like steel angel wings behind his back.

“Treachery and foul magic!” Malco scorned as yet another of Aaron's swords shattered on impact with Halazuel. “Do you intend to drown Yaleria with your evil until only you would dare be master of it?”

Aaron could not care less about yet another shattered sword. He drew another from the array on his back to continue his relentless assault. The mist from the shattered blade had yet to disperse with the wind before it was replaced by another lining the reserves folded behind him.

“Something buried that deep is before my time. Perhaps you should consult with your witch what your accursed family tried to hide!”

The Count's attacks were parried with ease, but the strength behind each blow taxed the Duke's endurance.

“Whatever is buried without a tombstone is not mean to be found,” Malco growled in retorted through clenched teeth. “Unless you simply could not help yourself to raising Pandemonium in my realm.”

The Duke persisted in spit of the onslaught. Although Aaron's swords could cleave stone they stopped dead on impact with his own enchanted sword, Halazuel. A behemoth of a greatsword made from Tundra Ore. A rare metal called down from the heavens above by monks residing on a barren wasteland island far to the North-East. The ground there being perpetually obliterated by star fall. Meteors of the purest iron, and blessed by the heavens, are summoned from a wandering cluster with a biannual procession through a ritual.

Its primordial steel gave Halazuel incredible hardiness and a signature blue tint of a celestial blade. It would be unthinkable now to

gather so much together in one blade alone, the winds of magic have been but a shadow of their ancient selves. Yet that did not Duke Malco swinging the greatsword about as if it weighed only half its size. Each swing with Halazuel managed to score some manner of damage, but the window of opportunity for Malco to strike were limited. Aaron's reach was much greater due to his new size. Sparks flew with every glancing blow, but no thousand cuts could to daunt the jet black Juggernaut.

“After I cut you down I'll do the same to your ancestor's shame,” The Count howled, and brought two swords at once.

His newfound and supernatural speed was remarkable, but Aaron is as inept and untrained in battle as he was last week. Every attack came without a feint. Each blow lacked finesse. There were obvious beginning and an obvious end. Should any of them hit, Malco would surely perish, but Aaron could not land a mortal blow no matter how long he flailed. They were evenly matched in all but time which Aaron had a nigh infinite reserve of.

Both of the Count's swords missed as Malco leaped back and each tip planted themselves deep into the floor. A brief flash of sparks was the only resistance it could muster, but he could not pull them from the stone. Frost formed quickly and chilled the ground into permafrost. Each sword was now locked in a natural vice grip as the stone shrunk in the bitter cold. Aaron stood hunched over and vulnerable long enough for Malco to bring the might of Halazuel down. Aaron abandoned the trapped weapons and raise arms in an effort to protect his head. The heavy blade mangled Aaron's right forearm and let loose a cacophonous clang and twisting of steel. Aaron uttered no wail of pain as he lumbered backward with an arm hung limp and dangling at his side.

Aaron's singular red orb quivered with behind Aaron's visor. It locked onto the woman standing far behind Malco who had prolonged this conflict far past its expected conclusion. His anger had surpassed that of Malco's which was a feat onto itself. She had haunted him for decades. The fact that she claimed the best of intentions meant little.

That is why she had to scream for Malco to stop. Sensing blood, from his opponent's shattered arm, he coiled like a snake and gathered his strength to lash out for one more decisive blow. The banshie like cry froze Malco in place. He glowered over his shoulder to see the Corpse Princess' eyes were not on him and pleading for forgiveness or asking for understanding, but trained directly on the

Black Count. His eyes were thrown back for no more than a mere second, but when he looked back the sense of vulnerability his warrior instinct had picked up on had vanished.

Aaron no longer nursed his ruined arm, the act had been discarded. It swung limp at his side, but the fingers twitched and clenched into a fist. And Malco had looked back in time to witness the horrific sight of the metal twisting in ways that no human arm could endure. It mattered not if the bones in his forearm were still intact or in splinters. No man's limb could contort in such a way. Yet after a few stomach churning crunches and squeals of metal later his arm had fully healed.

“What in God's name...” Malco cursed.

“He has sacrificed more than you could know,” Hyria whispered in reply.

Aaron rolled his shoulder and taunted his opponent's futile efforts with a fist clenched tight.

“I must admit a new found respect for the vagabond actor. His craft is more difficult than I care to admit.”

And once more the count materialized another sword in his once mangled arm. It was as if it had never been harmed in the first place. Just like the gashes across the rest of the armor, the entire arm healed with the power of living metal. It moved like quicksilver and could readily assume the properties of hardened steel.

“I will applaud your intuition, witch... Or perhaps you rely on something more?” Aaron thought aloud as the red orb behind his visor set its gaze upon Hyria. “This is not the first time you have offered council. I know as much now... Does that mean the tower is your doing as well? Did you think I'd run off with my tail between my legs because of some architecture?”

For the first time since her arrival Hyria stepped out from Malco's shadow and stood between the Duke and the Count. She did so without a guard raised, or any concern for her well-being. One heel in front of the other with her hips sashaying.

“I do not believe I have properly introduced myself, peasant,” Hyria taunted, eliciting a low tinny grumble from behind Aaron's throat guard. “I am Hekati Fioina Hyria, Crown Princess of Yaleria. The one true Yaleria, Greater Yaleria. Land of the Eternal

Moon, the Seat of the Dead."

With that proclamation, the Princess let the last reaming scraps of her disguise melt away. Her skin paled and tinted a subtle shade of blue; corpse-like in its appearance. The reddened shade of her eyes, before a subtle maroon, returned to its true blood red hue. Their pearl white iris remained, an eerie and unsettling sight whose stare felt like piercing ice. Hyria's curls lost its golden luster and faded to platinum. Lastly, the ethereal claws encased her delicate pale white hands. It had the texture of sheer satin cloth and could be mistaken as long billowing sleeves from a pair of arm lengths gloves. Its true nature was an extension of herself rather than the black, long, slit thighs cocktail dress she wore. There could also be no mistaking of the clawed visage which gave off a bestial and predatory motif.

"And the years have treated me kindly as a wight, one of the noble dead... And that tower is something far beyond you, me, or anyone else who yet stalks this mortal plane."

The gallery of knights and mercenaries witnessing the duel tore their eyes away long enough to look upon one another with apprehension. Murmurs of disbelief grew beyond whispers into a roar. The knights of Yaleria had all taken their vows to exterminate the undead, but no man alive today had actually seen one of the living dead before. It had been over a hundred years since the last incursion from the Shadelands assailed the walls of the Brightkeep. A woman of pale complexion defied their expectations. It stalled any thoughts of betrayal and mutiny. Assisted by the presence of the clearly inhuman black knight and the earthquakes of a strange tower risen in the distance.

"You play your games for a petty duchy, but it is I who hold the rights for succession," Hyria declared loudly for all those assembled to hear. "By birth right it is I who hold dominion over all you can see. So too was my family been charged with safe-guarding that tower. Long before history graced the words of men."

Aaron's eye quivered, but this time it was not due to rage. His composure wavered as it dawned upon him that he had came face to face with the very entity he had been raised from a boy to reject. The Hyria family name was but a legend to him. Dismissed by his father and his grandfather. A tale to give the Malco household its divine right to preside over Yaleria as its masters. His lineage as a noble was that short and did not go back far enough in time for any trace of his blood to have remembered the threat the Shadeland had stood for through

the centuries.

And the Malco family name had stood guard against the land of the dead, without ever realizing their wall did nothing to keep a greater danger at bay.

However, the mistresses' true identity did not leave him completely unfazed. He had correctly perceived her undeath and her unsanctioned magical abilities, but the worst he envisioned was a witch, or manner of necromancer who had granted herself unduly longevity. What he could not have prepared for was the existence of a wight. A reanimated zombie would be as a peasant and a wight be their king. Only the most blue blooded could achieve such a state after death. With memories and sanity preserved. But the most concerning of all was the wight's touch. Legends say that mere contract with a wight would allow it to drain your life force away till death. After which the afflicted would be forced into servitude as its undead slave. A mindless zombie for most. A depraved and doomed wight for the unfortunate strong.

Yet a man whose greed outweighed his principles compelled him not to cower and save face instead.

“You speak of rightful claims? This world is for the living. Ghosts and phantoms have no right to meddle with the living!” Aaron bellowed.

“The royal family is the kingdom. Their blood is just as part of the land as the water that runs through its rivers,” the Princess said while laying her hand across her stilled heart. “They lay their lives down for the kingdom, so that it may prosper for those not yet born. And in Yaleria, the dead serve the living. The living do no slave for the memories of the dead... But your greatest crime of all is delving into powers far beyond your control.”

She set her eyes upon Aaron a second time and this time with piercing conviction.

“And so you, you upstart mud blooded scoundrel,” she chided with harsh words but with her soft noble voice, “You have no right to lecture me when your machinations raise that ghastly tombstone over my kingdom!”

And so the ivory white elephant in the room was at last acknowledged. The Count was quick to dismiss it.

“I have done no such thing,” Aaron growled. “They say dead men tell no tales!” He bellowed to all the knights and soldiers in the galleries. “Apparently they can still deceive and tell lies.”

“Then your nameless one acts in spite of you,” Hyria said accusingly. “The same man who bestowed upon you that infernal armour... Another tombstone. This one for your soul.”

“Stop your riddles, witch,” Aaron menaced, his patience waning.

“Your carelessness has brought the wrath of Babel upon us all.”

“I said enough with your riddles!” The count screamed once more.

“As a fallen tree decays to nourish the earth, as the living dead were once risen to sow and plough those fields at the behest of the living. You despise Yaleria. It is with cruel irony you become everything you hate it for. You line the pockets of men with silver, so that they may bring death. You sow seeds for bitter grapes because your very touch spreads death. Every thought in that wretched head of yours wonders how murder and betrayal can make you a pound of gold richer with another lever for power and influence. Even in love you spread death.”

The politeness in her voice had now long since vanished.

“You asked before if I were something more, Count Aaron. I am more than a mere mistress—”

“—I did no such thing!” Malco screamed and pleaded with his men.

“I am my father's daughter, Crown Princess of Yaleria. I pledge my undying love to the very man who carries the blood of he who slew him in mercy... But also a friend and confidant.”

To whom were the words on the tip of Malco and Aaron's tongue.

“The dearly departed Emily,” Hyria said and the name clamped down with its icy grip on Malco and Aaron's heart. “A descendent of the man who killed my father, but my anger has long since waned. I know he had gone mad and his fate was sealed. A

thousand years ago I may have bathed this land in blood regardless. All in a childish fit to avenge him. But today is the eve of a new world. Modelled after the old, but with the mistakes of the past banished. To never be repeated. My heart is still, dead and silent, but now filled with warmth thanks to her Ladyship. I came to know it having foreseen Brandon and Emily Malco in my dreams. I came to accept it with the time we had together. For however short it was destined to be, because I knew the time is close at hand. This was knowledge, painful knowledge, I knew of long before they were born."

"Foreknowledge... Then all those times—" Aaron muttered.

"A seer, through and through," Malco growled.

Malco had come to that conclusion long ago, but not before he had wagered everything on a game he could not win. How could one win a game of chess against someone who could see all the moves you will make beforehand and could act upon the one most likely to be true. As though it had a mind of its own, the blue amulet sandwiched in her bosom, suspended by a silver necklace, glimmered knowingly without the aid of any other source of light.

That same power, however, is what has foiled all attempts by Aaron to assassinate the Duke. Whether it be from poisoned food that Hyria would suddenly rob from his plate and goblet to bandits waiting in ambush for the Duke's retinue of knights marching down the roads or laying in wait in the Duchy's hunting grounds.

The Duke knew of them, but it would have been insufficient evidence to have brought Hyria to the stand. Had he acted on her council and imprisoned Count Aaron, the Imperial Courts would have likely intervened. Aaron would have made sure of that with many greased palms.

Another light shined, but in the Duke's head as the question finally dawned on him.

"When did you—"

"You always blamed me for what happened to Emily. A fair accusation if you blame me for doing nothing at all."

"You let her die... She fell ill and you failed to do anything at all," Aaron menaced, directing the rage rumbling behind the blackened steel plates toward Malco. "Had I known, had you not kept me away, had the message reached me... I would have moved heaven and

earth. I would have hollowed up the silvers mines till the earth caved in —”

Aaron's voice tripped over itself and went silent when a look of pity washed over Hyria's face.

“I could have stopped her a thousand times and upon the next she would have died all the same.”

“Stop... her?” Aaron's voice quaked.

“As I knew you since you were a boy, so too did I speak and play with Emily since she was but an infant. Of course you were so similar, the two of you were stubborn, like your father. You never once mentioned me to the other... I spent all those late night hours merely talking. Petty, but oh so precious girl's talk. All that time I knew the end would come. Yet I carried on smiling.” The Princess closed her eyes and smiles softly before resetting her face to its cold determination to see the confrontation to its end. “She was terrified of me at first. I placated those fears by pledging on all my honour I would never lie. Once she knew I had no intention to eat her, our friendship grew, but I was also forced to tell the truth about you.”

Aaron's foot slid backward into a defensive stance merely by having Hyria raise a single finger in his direction.

“You were to be married to fill the Malco coffers. Emptied after years of depleted trade due to the strife throughout the Empire these past four decades. And you, you scoundrel, had schemes already in place. You would produce an heir with Emily. Then you would kill the head of the Malco household. Succession would pass onto our flesh and blood. You would be reagent. Close enough to Duke for one so lowly as yourself.”

Aaron took another step backward. Feelings of his mind being open for all to see ravaged him.

“When Emily heard of this, the guilt of her beloved brother's death weighed heavily on her soul. She begged and pleaded with me to make it right. Night after knight, moon after moon and year after year. But her marriage to you meant certain doom for her brother. Should your servants gain full reign in Sulunaerg, not even I could hope to prevent it while confined to the shadows. And so too did she learn of what you planned to do with the land of her forefathers...”

“Stop,” Aaron demanded while being pressured another step

backward.

“And lastly, with no other recourse, and resigned to her face, she desired to know what lay in store for her within your hands... And so she fell ill, by her own hands.”

The Count mustered enough fortitude to stop his retreat and press forward and wail his demands again, “I said stop... No more of your lies. You putrid walking corpse!”

“She drank the milk of Warlock's Weed and her organs began to fail. Painlessly, methodically, until her life ended.”

Having been stripped of all reason, the Count charged Hyria. The light shining behind his visor rivalled a lighthouse as he raised his swords up high. He would bring them down and scissor the wight's head from her shoulders. Those swords, simple and mundane, glowed with a red hot fury as the armoury of them splayed out like wings behind him all merged into two swords alone. In the face of the charging bull, the Princess did nothing more than raise her hands as if in prayer.

She welcomed his anger. Those watching could assume it was accepting it as penance for her failures. A weight lifted off her shoulders that let her soul free. Her existence looked so transient, pale and fickle. But it was still a sacrilegious existence with unholy consequences.

Aaron put all the weight of steel cladding his frame down upon Hyria and the blades in his hand met with the open palms of Hyria where they stopped. Instead of a crunching of bone and tearing of flesh, the sound of boiling water hissed. Two ghostly extensions of her arm snagged the blades mere centimetres from her actual hands. As her hands remained open and relaxed the ghostly claws clamped down hard. Her ample thighs flexed and her knees braced to soak the impact, but she did not falter. Aaron's fury vaporized because he realized what he had walked into.

Try as he might, the Count could not wrench the blades free. Neither could he drop the swords. Frost had quickly spread up the blades and had seized his wrists. On top of that was Hyria's unholy strength. An affliction that all undead suffered. Their damned existence bestowed upon them great physical strength, far surpassing mortals. Limits placed upon living bodies in order to protect them from tearing themselves apart did not exist for the undead.

The danger of the Count's predicament dawned upon him a moment too late. Steel bit into steel once more. His eyes where drawn toward the ground where he spotted the blue tinted blade protruding from his abdomen. That could only mean the rest of it was sticking out from his back. And looking backward he saw Malco having driven Halazuel into his lower back.

“Your nameless one will be stopped,” Hyria said as she released the Count from her grip. “Because I too have placed my own piece upon this gameboard. And he has long since put you in check.”

Aaron groaned, “The man from the party. With the fire lizard.”

“Released the seals keeping this land's magic fields suppressed.”

Hyria took a step backward and whispered a magical incantation. It took shape from a lost language which had not graced fresh air for over two millennia. The winds began to shift under pressure from the words of power till the four winds were brought together into one roiling mass. It whipped and lashed against the faces of all present who had to shield their faces from the dust and dirt from blinding their eyes. From all that wind, the temperature began to plummet due to the wind chill. Til everyone's breath became icy and their muscles shivered and shook.

Taken from the thin air itself, Hyria commanded ice to form. The humid marsh climate turned arid dry as it gathered and formed into a sphere before her. More than ordinary ice, the head sized sphere of water was frozen water so impossibly compact that it could rival the hardness of steel. Yet in her hands it remained as malleable as iron smelting at the forge. It is from this raw material that Hyria shaped it into a weapon.

To transform magical energy into a tool for destruction required a mind capable of malice. Hyria's nature made that extraordinary difficult. The late spring afternoon was no more at the castle. It became a blustery mid winter storm. Snow and hail danced upon the ribbons of artificial wind, perpetually drawn toward Hyria sphere of cold. A taxing exercise in magic, but necessary, because Hyria's gentle nature abhorred what she must do next. It mattered not who it was to be done to.

All the while, Count Aaron struggled and trashed. Malco, with

his beard's whiskers becoming brittle icicles, weathered both storm and the black giant's supernatural strength. He dug his boots into the ground and kept his foe grounded and still. Rogue thoughts entered Malco's head about how Aaron could still stand. Surely his spine had been severed given where he had plunged his Halazuel through. No answer came to him, because it took everything he had to hold on tight. It took the additional ten percent to stomach the shame of having to rely on the Princess to do his foe in.

The sphere of ice began to morph its shape into an icy talon. It was similar to those that briefly shielded the Sulunaerg from Aaron's forces. She aimed it directly for his heart and the strain it took to keep the ice sharp took its visible toll on the princess. Progress was painfully slow and gave the Count a great deal of time to trash and curse, but Malco kept holding him steady with everything he had; until the crack of thunder split the chilly air.

High up in the sky storm clouds gathered. From the darkness covering the noon day sun came forks of violet lightning. Their screeches and buzzing were unnatural and wholly not of this world. Babel had risen and now it had awoken. The four winds that Hyria had gathered scattered and were pulled by a vacuum at the tower's crown. She watched with dismay as the sphere of magic ice she had gathered unravelled like a spool of wool and was sucked as if through a straw toward the skies.

“No, he couldn't have! He wouldn't—” Hyria wailed in a rare moment of lost composure.

The powers of prophecy that guided the princess now plagued her. What had been the shining red luster of her eyes glazed over as abject chaos filled her mind's eye. A tremendous disturbance had taken the future and altered it through brute force. More so than throwing a boulder into the stream, but to have cut out the very land from underneath it, casting it down into unfamiliar topography.

With the sphere of ice no longer a threat, and having recovered from being caught flat footed, Aaron brought one of his heavily plated fists to bear. A smoothly swung backhand knocked the wight off her feet and tumbling across the dusty and frost covered stone.

Duke Malco's heart raced as his instincts screamed at him with a blood curdling howl. Aaron was loose and enraged. Stronger than before. He fought back by pushing the blade further and twisting it up and down, side to side. He pushed until the small of Aaron's back met

with the crossguard. Try as he might, the count could not swing his arms back far enough to grab hold of his lone remaining assailant. Neither could Malco wrestle the juggernaut to the ground, so that another fatal blow could be dealt.

Betwixt all the twisting and grinding steel, a prick on the back of Malco's neck drew his eyes upward. Rather than the back of Aaron's helmet, the red glowing orb greeted him. It burned ever brighter and looked more like an open flame than a candle behind red tinted lantern. He had no time to ponder how it was possible. Aaron's whole torso, at the ribcage rather than at the hip, had rotated a full hundred and eighty degrees around. It was child's play to seize him by the neck. Bones creaked and cartilage threaten to crack. A desperate attempt to fight back against the grip had him abandon the hilt of his sword and try prying the hot black talons open. His struggled were rewarded by being choke slammed onto the cold ground below.

Those witnessing the scene were not sure what they ought to be most terrified of. From the display of magic unheard of and unseen by most. A man surviving, and standing up to, a sword right through the back. To the inhuman contortions of the armoured combatant. Nor Aaron's own men could muster a cheer at what appeared to be victory. They watched with horrified expressions as the lower half walked backward to rotate itself back into proper position below the upper half.

“What's wrong? Your magic tricks fail you?” Aaron rumbled.

Hyria struggled to get her broken body off the ground. She failed time and time again, the gorgeous ballroom dress tattered to pieces and nearly failing as clothing altogether. None of her wounds bled which showed all those watching the last proof of her undeath that the most skeptical present could ask for.

Meanwhile, the Duke was no better off. His armour has stopped any bones from shattering, but the force of the impact scrambled his insides. He coughed and wheezed from being winded and he shook his head in vain after being so thoughtfully discombobulated. The world spun all-round and sickened him to the stomach. Should he manage to get back onto his feet, the journey back down to the ground would happen immediately after.

While Hyria and Malco lay incapacitated, the Count wrapped his gauntlets around the blade of Halazuel and began pushing it back through his stomach. Each inch of progress came with an odious ring of rending metal. Yet the most peculiar of all was the lack of any blood

on the blade. It did not take long to free it and Halazuel found itself captive in the Count's grip. Like a vulture circling above its next meal, Aaron seethed and planned his next move. He savoured the moment and made sure it would not pass as another mere forgettable moment.

“Allow me to pay in turn, kind Duke—” Aaron said menacingly, a moment before booting Malco in the ribs and flipping him onto his back.

And with one merciless motion, the blade of Halazuel was plunged down into the lower back of its defenceless master. It cut through the wolf hide and steel chainlinks no differently than the flesh and bone. It split the vertebrae in twain and through the fatty abdomen just the same. Brandon screamed in pain the first half foot, but passed out from the shock from thereafter. His body pinned to the castle grounds; Halazuel plunged half deep into the stone.

“—Let angels sing you to your rest.”

No sooner than taking a couple steps backward to savor in the full sight of his victory, Hyria materialized from smoke to Malco's side. She had gone up in a puff of smoke and teleported across the distance in an instant. Her eyes were wide with terror as she grabbed hold of Halazuel and tried to pull it from the stone. An impossibility, because the sword burned her hands on contact. The sword had been forged and enchanted to slay the undead. Mere contact with the dead is enough. She whimpered and babbled to herself in a panic each time she was rebuffed by the sword. Each time the pain became too great she let go only to try again immediately. Its magic dispelled her claws, the burns began to scar her pale corpse skin black.

“Now this... I cannot tell whether it is a comedy, or a tragedy,” Aaron said with snide amusement.

She only stopped grabbing at the sword when she noticed the dark blood oozing out from the wound. It snaked its way through the grooves in stone. Leaving behind eerie etching wherever it flowed. Halazuel had missed the major artery, barely. Life drained slowly from the Duke. And for the first time, the Princess laid her hands upon the Duke. She cradled his cheek in the palms of her hand and shuddered as the flesh was not much warmer than her own.

“What a pity. It appears I missed the mark,” Aaron taunted the grieving Princess. “I will, however, make it up to you. I am not an unreasonable man. I am a man who still possesses a heart.”

A hiss of steam and clattering iron. The enigma of living steel showed its true nature. Aaron could not stop in his gloating and therefore showed his hand. He did not doff his armour, rather the plate covering his chest pulled aside to show what lay behind. And in all the mysteries of time and magic that the Princess was privy to, she had never witnessed before something so profoundly alien. Surrounded by steel and tubes was a single beating heart. It pumped no blood, but carried with it a life-force all the same. A mockery of life, and all that is holy.

A product of the nameless man. The Mad Alchemist Vee. Creating a being more machine than man. Powered by forces not native to this world. Torn from its rightful home of demons and appropriated for new purposes.

“You never stood a chance from the start,” Aaron proclaimed as the cage quickly closed back around his exposed heart. “You were kings who never died, and payed your souls to achieve it. I have done the same and kept everything and given up nothing more than weakness. So here are the terms of your surrender: I pull the sword from the stone and you take your broken half of a man with you to wherever you came from behind that wall. Pledge on that 'honour' of yours to never return. I shall inherit Yaleria as my own and will rule it without fear of the Shadelands till the end of time... A moment I now know is possible to witness for myself.”

Hyria, with her body wrapped around Malco to protect it from Aaron, looked up with tears and fury in her eyes.

“And I shall deal with Vee myself. I do not recall granting him permission to meddle with what is mine.”

“In the light you'll find the end your just reward,” scorned with dulled eyes as if they were fixed somewhere far behind his head.

Hyria's fury turned to rage and she refused to give in. Aaron let the seconds pass mirthfully before giving a disingenuous sigh of resignation,

“A lover's suicide it is? I can arrange that. Should your undead hordes decide to act without your staying hand, I will—”

Her anger was slow to build, but it very quickly abated. Although he rode high off his victory, Count Aaron sensed something wrong. Hyria's hateful glare had turned to horror. The crackling of thunder rose from an ambience to a low rumbling roar. Even those

typically ignorant of magic started to feel lethargic. Something feasted greedily upon their energy. It became harder and harder for the men to stay standing on their feet, and it had been several minutes since they so much as swung a sword.

Aaron could ignore it no longer and dared to turn his back on Hyria and Malco. He quickly spied what the fuss appeared to be all about. A jewel had formed on top of the crown of the ivory tower. It looked like a dark amethyst. It hurled a flurry of dark lightning across the stormy skies. Yet the roar of thunder did not arrive as expected. Replacing it was an ear piercing screech. All those whose knees were weak and near buckling began to drop to the ground by the dozens. It proceeded the mother of all bolts that screamed across the sky. And was followed by silence.

Everyone began to pull themselves back to their feet and look about in wonder about what happened. Knights and Mercenaries alike forgot allegiances and helped one another off the ground. The only one prepared for what came next was Hyria, who threw her body across Malco's head and averted her gaze. Aaron turned his head to watch, but could not resist the lure of curiosity in the direction the last bolt of lightning streaked to.

The entire horizon lit with a blinding flash. Screams of pain and fear killed the silence. Aaron stumbled backward due to his lidless eye soaking in the full force of the flash. He raised his hands to his visor in a vain attempt to shield it a moment too late. A grumble of pain reverberated in his throat which let loose a tinny howl of agony. He had no eyes to be blinded he pushed through the psychological pain to see the horizon had given birth to a whole other light brighter than the sun. Towering into the sky was a massive plume of smoke and ash in the shape of a mushroom.

There would be only a few seconds of silence before the blast wave hit. It crashed into the castle walls and tossed men from the ramparts like leaves caught in a hurricane. Stones were ripped free from the wall and entire sections of the old castle were peeled away. He spied Hyria and Malco surrounded by some manner of forcefield which flickered as it tried to whether the storm. His last moments were spent trying to reach out for it, so that he could tear it away.

A millisecond later it crashed into Aaron and nearly blew him off his feet. Behind it came a vacuum which tried to pull him forward. Before a cart sized section of the wall came flying by and smashed him into the keep's more solid inner wall.

Chapter 105

It was only for a moment, but it looked as if the whole world had ended. A brilliant flash of light that overwhelmed the senses shrouded the world in white. Yet something so radiant, like a candle burning bright, could not last but more than an instant. I avoided being struck blind by shielding my eyes, but that wasn't enough blacken my sight.

What I saw when I dared to look shook me to my very core. The Brightwall, which spanned a valley between two great mountains, is crumbling. But all things built eventually return to the earth, what scared me out of my wits was the earth itself being obliterated. Two mountains, their names I did not know, stood like a pair of bookends to the wall. They tapered off into a crescent shaped mountain range that met far to the north. A peculiar shape. Dare I say unnatural? It enclosed the Shadelands as if by design. Now one of these great mountains had vanished.

I could explain it no other way than if a spoon had reached down and taken a sphere shaped chunk out of the planet's surface. The granite proved to be as resilient as soft served ice-cream too. Half the mountain was no more. My vantage point atop this tower gave me a bird's eye view, the best seat in the house. I had to be no less or more twenty to fifty kilometers away. But no distance, other than being obscured by the horizon, could hide such a change at any angle. Or perhaps change is not the best word to use. I think it would be better if I thought of it as being erased.

So mind boggling was this turn of events that I nearly missed its effects take place. Racing outward in all directions were the clouds in the sky being pushed aside. Along the ground I spied a force sweep across the land.

The words escaped my lips before my mind caught up, “At the speed of—”

A thunderous crack belatedly played herald to the destruction. I had never before heard anything so deafening. I had to cover my ears, but in vain. At the speed of sound, my thought concluded, a second too late. My body had tensed up to prepare itself to be blown away, but a protective barrier around the tower took the full blunt force head on. It was a sonic boom, but another sound soon took its place at trying to rupture my ear drums. A whine, something like a tuning fork being struck. A very large tuning fork screaming bloody murder. The ground itself did not so much as quake. Surely it should have at least

shuddered. This tower is so high in the sky with so thin a diameter that something so powerful should have snapped it in two.

That would not be the end of the apocalypse. Another quake shook the marble beneath me. All the debris littering the steps rattled from its resting place. Less an earth shattering tremor and more of a vibration. It precluded a towering pillar of ash erupting from the hole in the earth.

What clear skies had just been ploughed were quickly replaced with a burning hot soot. A volcanic eruption took place. Lava vomited forth from the pit and oozed down the wounded mountain's sides A wholly natural event in the footsteps of the supernatural. A beautiful early summer day quickly became choked by black clouds of suffocating ash. Fresh flashes of lightning streaked across the skies. Tainted red to accentuate the dread and foreboding. Should that destruction not be biblical enough, those dark clouds rained not water, but fire upon the land as molten slag dredged up from deep beneath the crust now crashed down across the land.

The protective barrier surrounding Babel whined and screamed with each impact, but did not yield an inch. Hundreds of small isolated fires smoldered as far as I could see. I could only hope that there was more water than peat laying about to feed the fires. Even the Shadelands lit up under its perpetual fog could not remain impeccability stoic and static.

When fears of my immediate safety were placated, my thoughts immediately turned to dread. This place was protected, but the rest of Yaleria is not. I strained to sit upright on the stairs to get a better look and regretted it immediately. The marshland's stagnant water were stagnant no more. A blast of hurricane force winds caused a tsunami of filthy water to crash over what dry land existed. As soon as it had been flooded, the land then burned. Trees which had been bent then ripped backward by the vacuum provided soggy tinder for the struggling inferno. Sturdy willow trees bent and broke, sending wooden shrapnel in every direction and now fluttered about as fiery embers.

“Oh god no,” the desperate, begging, prayer slipped from my lips.

I did not want that thought crossing my mind right now... What about the girls? I could not see whatever happens below. Was it as safe as it is up here behind this magical barrier? Had the tower rising completely destroyed the tower? I had no way of knowing. What about

all those people throughout Yaleria? What about those soldiers fighting?

I endured the pain so that I might roll over and catch a glimpse as the concussive blast washed past us. It had greatly diminished in strength, but slammed into the city behind us all the same. Roofs blown clear off, stone walls gave way. How ironically fortunate it was that the Count tore that city apart to build his war camp's palisade walls and war machines. There is less to burn as the rain of fire swept over Mornurg.

“Magnificent,” a voice devoid of emotion uttered nearby.

Like a rubber band stretched to its limit, sensing Vee's presence snapped me back into reality. After discarding me down the stairs, the madman contented himself with being is own captive audience. He raised that strange wrist mounted device on his forearm and soaked in all the data he was able to read from the dancing electrical string on its display. He continued speaking, but to no one in particular

“If this is accurate, then it means direct confirmation of Herferot's Hypothesis... No no no, maybe even Herferot and Osstroong's Dichotomy Principle. Yes, yes of course it would. The most simple explanation, the one with the least assumptions, must be the correct one.”

Although I no longer had his attention, the mad man carried on as if there was an audience who could begin to understood what he is talking about. Perhaps he liked the sound of his own voice? I sincerely doubted that. It could be a quirk which could make him seem human. Surely, the man was just plain insane. More so than he was before.

“Oh, you sorry sordid lot at the Tower, if only you had removed your own expectations of divine behaviorism, you might have come this far... But you couldn't let your world large enough. You had to keep it small, so your own egos, insignificantly small as they are, could claim dominion over it. Didn't you?”

And his speaking to the dead solidified his descent into abject madness.

With no more data to take in, the Mad Professor and Ouroboros member meandered away from the edge. He is completely unfazed by the destruction left behind in his wake. The fluctuation on his device and the numbers streaming across it were of far more importance. His

attention was drawn back to the console which conducted all this insanity. Although I could not beat witness, it's resonance echoed well within this shielded area, so his ramblings afforded me no peace. I could not begin to know who he's talking about, and what books they had written and theories they had concocted. It all tried to piece itself together in my mind's eye regardless.

“Saturation of one elemental property displaces all others. No two elements can occupy the same space in time,” he quoted, which sounded similar to something I'm more familiar with. “Then would pure astral energy not behave similarly? Yes. Yes Herferot, it does. You lived far before your time. Oh, how I would have loved to see your expression when faced with this data.” Vee said, his voice almost glowing with an ounce of emotion. “And here, now, I see astral energy does indeed have a physical property. Not as a mere manifestation of will, but as particle as well. Something that takes up space. Pure magic energy concentrated to such extremes can displaces all else in its vicinity... Even divine energies. Oh, how the Bishops who condemned you would howl in despair if they could bear witness.”

The tower began to shift again. Not from some exterior force, but from within. Vee had done something with the console and Babel danced in the palm of his hand. I watched as the Stonehenge-like stones forming a fence around the bottom floor rotated and shift. Some pillars rose higher and some sunk into the floor. All of them rotated around like horses on a carousel until they reached their next configuration.

“And Osstroong, oh, how your talents and genius wasted holding up the Star. I suppose I should thank you now. You were correct, after all. The Abyss is indeed a reflection of the Divine. You meditated on how mankind, made in God's image, could be capable of evil. If God were all that is good, but be in heaven, and the Abyss all that is evil in Hell, then that which resides on the boarders of each could exhibit the virtues and sins of either... But perhaps your shudder and shake to see your philosophies twisted against you so... But look now, look here, and see what an absence of God ushers onto this world!”

His flourish lead me to believe he was not talking about the destruction happening all around us.

“It is no wonder why the gods sought the destruction of these places. Shrines not onto them, but onto the very notion of power

itself. Able to undo their creation. Not transference, but complete and utter obliteration. A phenomenon by all accounts impossible. A man made miracle. One the Angel of Death himself would shudder at... And mankind knew their of their transgression. Why else would they shield themselves from heaven? Oh, the bittersweet irony they neglected the very pits of hell. That place whence their doom cometh."

An undeniable sense of dread chilled the tepid air. One of supernatural origin that even I could sense. It descended and made the air thick and suffocating. It was not from his words that the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, but a familiar whine and crackling of unknown fel energies. Mana began to concentrate once more. Funnelled from each stone pillar. Snaking their way upward through the air and toward a void of empty space above the tower's spire.

"Fuck—" I cursed, but had my rant cut short by a coughing fit.

I pulled my arm away from my face and a spatter of bright red blood stained the back of my hand. As the numbing sensation of the last rush of adrenaline subsided I began to feel the sharp stabbing pain along my rib cage and it was then I realized I might have cracked one. My situation became a lot more dire with the threat of internal bleeding, but that paled in comparison to what's in store for Yaleria. Vee intended to go round two with Babel.

"But the data is inconclusive," Vee muttered to himself as he no doubt busied himself with the console. "Yes, it is apparent how the Elders managed to produce the phenomenon. That still begs the question as to what means they utilized... Hmm. If only I could replicate the method of mana concentration to such extremes..."

He's seriously going to do it a second time so he can finish his damned experiment? Was demolishing half of Yaleria not enough? Now he has to destroy the other half as well. I watched as that bolt of lightning streaked across the sky and ploughed straight into that mountain. Now my mind couldn't shake the image of it happening again with the other... There would be nothing left of Yaleria after that. The resulting explosion would crash straight into Mornurg. Hundreds, possibly thousands, could be dead because of him. That number would jump to tens of thousands more if the other mountain was subjected to oblivion.

And growing, spinning, above the Babel spire grew another sphere of blue light. A precursor to the repulsive violet ball. Blue would

be the astral light, and the violet its spectral shift toward a more unstable form. That very same form which lashed out and warped space around it. I'd say it had ripped and teared reality itself like a wild beast gnashing and gnawing as its chains. That would mean there would be a few short minutes left before a second explosion.

Luckily the fires had not consumed the lands, yet. What had made Yaleria poor, its swamps and cold temperate climate, was at this point in time its sole savior. Remaining spring run-off meant there would be more water than peat, but that wouldn't save Yaleria. Time passed, but the rain of fire showed no sign of slowing down. Ash clouds by this point had completely blotted out the sun and the only source of natural light now were those fires. Vee enjoyed the pale blue light above us as a second sun.

It all came down to me then. If anyone was going to stop Vee now, there could be no one else. I came here to unseal this magic, so it could be used to put an end to this war. For better or for worse. Depending on who could put it to use. Hyria assured me that much, but she would be powerless if all magic for miles around were to be concentrated in one place. I had to put a stop to it. I had to stop this madness and senseless destruction. There's no way I could let Vee sate his curiosity at the cost of so many lives. Not after I unwittingly led him straight to it.

This was partly my fault... No. It's all my fault. I should have listened to my gut and knew this slimy bastard would pull something... But I took the easy way out. I couldn't make heads or tails of this. I took his council and now people have paid the price. I wanted to bring it all to and end to save more lives, but that's blown up in my face. That's why this pain doesn't matter right now. I don't have the right to complain, or hesitate. My body howled in protest as I rolled onto my stomach. There could be a rib ready to break off completely right now, but that couldn't stop me. It could drive right into my lung and collapse it, there might to be anything left worth surviving for if I laid here and continued to watch.

A sharp toothy grin flashed before my eyes. A warm claw extended that dissolved into mist before I could grab hold of it. No Rose to pull me forward. A gentle paw on my chest leaving behind a warm glow which had now left behind a cold empty void. No Susan to guide me. A thousand little sounds, but there was deafening lack of jovial cheer. No Chris to cheer me on. An empty feeling at my back where no one stood, hidden from sight. No Minte to have my back. I had a thousand questions racing through my mind with no answers in

sight. There Ba'el, so cocksure and sharp tongued, ready to answer them.

It's just me now. All their fighting, their laboring to get me here, all could be in vain.

I propped myself on the stairs with my elbows and held my dead weight up. One elbow at a time I crawled my way up one stair and another. All the debris in the way made it far more difficult. Some of it was gravel, some of it splintered wood, but the worst of it had to be stained glass. It cut my exposed arms and chest to ribbons, but they were only superficial cuts and not enough to bleed me dry anytime soon. What could stop me would be the ground. A pile of rubble gave way under my arm. It came suddenly and I flailed desperately to stop myself from tumbling back down the stairs. Worst of all I had to make a choice of what body part would break my fall. I settled on the side to chest which wouldn't push a rib into my lungs. Even then it left me winded.

Sharp breaths for air hurt more than the impact. Despite my raspy breathing I could still hear Vee mumbling above, but whatever he was saying didn't matter to me now. Rather, it served like a hook in my ear pulling me up. I indulged myself on thoughts of straggling the life out of him when I finally got my hands on him. That would shut him up.

By some stroke of fortune I had been rooted in place. My left hand had grabbed hold of something solid. Very solid. Something cylinder, like a hand railing. Once I had caught my breath I pulled myself back up and got a good look at it. It felt like wood and I confirmed it with a glance. It's a wooden shaft. My eyes traced it from bottom to top, and at the top I spied something remarkable. I recognized it. Barely, but there could be no mistaking it. It had been ruined, torn clean off, but at the head I saw the bit of an axe. It's blade had broken off, but this what remained of Nerick's axe. And like before it was heavy, but now far less so.

I gave it a go and tried to move it and eventually I wrestled it from the rest of the rubble. It looked a lot more like a mace now. Only the metal bit around the eye remained, but that would be enough and more than I dare ask for. Every ounce of strength I had left I put into my legs and stood back up. With each hand clenched around the handle I dragged the impossibly heavy club behind me.

“So this is the depths a ley line node's power?” Vee mused

as he took in the smorgasbord of data coming at him from both the console and his own measuring devices. “An endless reservoir of magic power. Yes, of course, the Elders would not have built them anywhere else...”

The sphere above had grown quite a bit in size by now. It would not be long until it collapsed in on itself and transformed into something horrid. But for now it gave off an undeniably eerie yet beautiful glow. My own eyes were not looking up like Vee's, but were fixed straight ahead as I crested the top of the stairs. It took a little momentum to swing the club over my shoulder and get the club above my head.

Now came the time to bring this to an end. This couldn't continue. I wouldn't let it happen again.

With the last stair cleared it became a lot easier to get my footing. Although there was great weight on my shoulders I plodded forward nonetheless. I made no effort to quiet my footsteps. There's no need. Vee didn't sense anything amiss until it's too late. The whole world faded away. It may have been blood loss narrowing my vision, but all the same it sharpened my focus.

I swung the club backward and then high above my head. It reached the apex of the swing and remained there for a moment before gravity took care of the rest. Perhaps it was his survival instinct, or perhaps he happened to hear my foot slam into the floor to give me the extra bit of leverage, it mattered not. Vee turned his head at the last moment. He had a faint mockery of a smile on his face and it quickly melted away. His eyes shot wide open and his mouth went slack as a scream prepared to escape. He began to fall over backwards, but it wouldn't have been fast enough. If I had been aiming at his head.

Vee stumbled backwards and onto his behind. The shaft of Nerick's axe went sailing through the empty space while its head came crashing down onto the console. I still don't know what kind of metal it was made of, but it made short work of that green crystal key all the same. The half of it which stood up from its slot shattered into a thousand pieces. A weak and pitiable snapping and shattering of glass could be distinctly heard above the crunching of marble.

“Ahh—” Vee garbled, stunned and motionless on the floor. “WHAA!” He screeched as his mind caught up with what he was seeing and what it meant.

Vee immediately dove forward and sprawled across the ground trying to collect the shattered pieces and trying in vain to put them back together again. I watched as I stepped back from the broken console. A couple tugs at the handle and it didn't wriggle a single millimeter.

Realizing his efforts were in vain, Vee stopped and glared at me with unfiltered hatred. “Do you have any idea what you have done!?”

To see that face being capable of any emotion was actually a little reassuring. It's a shame I had to disappoint it.

“I have no idea,” I said with a smile.

He scrambled to his feet, but that's as far as I let him get. I moved fast as a coiled snake and grabbed hold of him by the throat. A sound, like a squeak from a mouse, was squeezed out before I advanced and then slammed him into the adjacent wall.

“But you did!” came my howl of rage, in spite of myself.

Something triggered in the back of my mind and in my anger I lashed out. It took considerable effort to pry my grip loose enough that he could gasp for air. The sensation on my palm and between my fingers made me writhe with disgust. It's slimy and repulsive. So was Vee's face as he began to thrash like a wild animal. I triggered his phobia to its next level of magnitude.

His finger nails tore at the flesh of my hands and arms, but a few more cuts didn't faze me. He tried to kick at me a couple times, but if his legs weren't holding him up, I would, and he'd cut off his air completely. A pitiful gurgle oozed out after a few attempts... It's when he swung his fists at my chest to some effect. His arms were like strings, wet noodles, but the rocks at the end of them slammed into my rib and sent a searing pain from my core outward. My reaction was instinctual. I pulled my free hand pulled back, and drove it into his stomach. I let go with my other in time to dodge its contents being vomited up.

Vee rolled on the ground in a coughing fit. I brushed my hand across my lips and saw there was yet another trail of red left behind. Blood with saliva. A cautious prodding of my ribcage tersely pushed a now inflamed lump. No doubt it hid a shattered rib behind it.

“You—” Vee sputtered and coughed. “You destroyed—priceless artifact—bygone age. Over ten thousand years—A key to limitless power... Limitless potential. A means to unlock magic which can make men gods... And for what!?”

He tried in vain to get to his feet, but still hadn't caught his breath enough to do so and collapsed back down onto his stomach.

“And you'd pay for it with the lives of thousands,” was my retort.

“Don't be so naive!” Vee howled in return. “The lives of those insignificants you self-righteously protect have been currency for generations. Wallowing away in their thatched roof hovels. Ploughing dirt and weaving leaky baskets for their masters. Eating nothing but stale rusks. Living meaningless lives. Cloistered and trapped in this reviled corner of the continent. That's what they've been, and always will be. Long after you've come and gone it will remain the same. Their loss is a paltry price to pay for returning all man to its rightful glory. Only then will this cycle end.”

I spied something glint in the corner of my eye. A subtle sleight of hand which elicited an immediate, and instinctual, reaction. My boot came crashing down and kicked left arm out form under him. Not hard enough to break bone, but enough that what lay hidden in his palm came flying out. A small glass vial containing bottled lightning. It tumbled end over end and down the stairs toward the bottom floor. The way he tried to lunge after it in vain left me with the impression that it was his last. His whole body went limp as it escaped his grasp.

“The only thing you care about right now is yourself!” I screamed at the man crying out with fresh injuries. “Don't try to dress yourself up as some sort of messiah complex. You care for nothing but sating your curiosity. And for its own sake at that. Like hell you'd share your knowledge. You belong to a god dammed secret society for fuck's sake. No one has heard of you, because you've done nothing. I'd assume worse than nothing, since you don't think anything at all of destroying an entire nation!”

The slimy bastard was trying to distract me for long enough to arm that wrist device of his with another taser shock. I couldn't take him for completely defenseless, even as he lay sprawled out on the floor. I lifted him up off the floor by his coat's collar and held him up against the wall. His feet could no longer touch the floor, but his spindly limbs didn't have enough force to kick with any significant

force.

“What a humorously hypocritical statement,” Vee seethed, clearly shuddering with his phobia invoked. “Someone as mercenary as yourself—suddenly claiming to be some great hero. I wager they'd despise you the moment they lay eyes on you... Do you expect them to thank you for bringing about their nightmare?”

“That beats bringing about their Apocalypse!” I yelled and pressed him harder into the wall.

“They'll wish they were dead after you are through with them! Or maybe not, since death is no escape from this place. After all, you ally yourself with the damned. The undead and seek to unleash them on the world once more!”

“And you rip out their—”

“They—have—no—such—thing,” Vee hissed.

Such a horrific statement. I could not bring myself to react.

“You. Know. NOTHING,” Vee continued, his shuddering with fear and rage subsiding. “I expected more from you. I really did, Mr. Laven. I could see that spark in your eye. I've seen it many times before. They all wanted the truth. And they got it, one way or another... This may be the first time I've been wrong. Woefully and willingly blind. Do your cover them with cloth, or have you go so far as to gouge them out?”

Besides the crackling of the sphere above us, whose growth had stalled, there was silence. We stared at one another. Neither man backing down, two pairs of eyes burning with fury.

“Because I've also seen those eyes. Yes, the ones right there,” he said gesturing to them with a wave of a hand. “Those aren't eyes looking for truth. No, those are vengeful eyes. Not just any vengeful eyes. You see those eyes on beasts. Unbefitting of a man... You've surrendered yourself to your passions. You've fallen for ploys.”

I narrowed these eyes of mine into a laser focus, daring him to continue while I had his neck in my grip.

“Are you familiar with Dauub's prophecy? No. I doubt you would. You don't strike me as the kind who studies in a monastery... It's an old one. It goes by many names, but you see a version of it no

matter where you go, in both time and space. All religions, all cultures, have woven the tale into their myth. The short of it: Babel fell, the gods condemned man to seven disasters. Do you know how many this world of ours has endured? Hmm?.. It's six. And the last one... Yes... There's that glimmer in your eye! You know. You know!”

Somehow I remember it, “Xrilix.”

“Um'Shalax'A'Salor, or however it is pronounced in Infernal,” Vee nodded. “Or as the title is said in common tongue: The End Of All Days. A thousand years ago, the Monster Lord unleashed unfathomable ruin and suffering upon humanity. Oh, how many nations and peoples were snuffed out in that dark and genocidal crusade. For you see, others like it before had at least enslaved and conquered. Xrilix was nothing but destruction. Unbound and unfettered...”

Vee trailed off and nodded his head as a cue for me to finish the though.

“Rage,” I replied

“Wrath. Wrath, Mr. Laven. One of the Deadly Sins. Because there have been many Monster Lords, but there have only been six of any significance. And they've all followed a pattern. And there is but one missing in that pattern... Lust.”

I could feel my heart thump, aggravating my chest wound.

“And the Monster Lord of these days is more powerful than the last. She remade Monsterkind in her image. Vessels of beauty, fertility... Temptation. But I know you know, the fact remains that monsters birth further monsters. Women mutate into them and men fall for them as easily as leaves in Autumn. But to what end, Mr. Laven? I am a man of reason, not faith, but I believe in patterns. And she, Lilith, underwent coronation with another title. Have you heard that one? No?.. Um'Saldie'Ni'Jiriah: The Dawn Of New Days.”

I tightened my grip around Vee's collar and he writhed about as it got harder for him to breathe.

“It's all the same. All of it. Rather than kill with terror, it kills with kindness. A hijacking of a greater primal urge in mankind. Lower than that of fear, the desire to reproduce. In the end it's all about the destruction of mankind. And how do they accomplish this? By manipulating your brain. A flow of hormones and your higher functions cease. Quite diabolical.”

“How about you stop beating around the bush and say it!” I shouted as I shook him.

“You exhibit all the clinical signs of limerence. But you don't realize it can never be returned. Not in any real capacity.”

My grip clamped down harder than before and now Vee croaked as he continued his pleading rant.

“A survival strategy for monsterkin. With the amount of sexual activity they engage in, you'd expect their population to be far greater... Yet it isn't. Why? Well, because their fertility rates are hindered. As to be expected. In terms of physiology, it is not optimal, compatible, with human biology. Incomplete. Least we forget the primary abyssal elemental property of their kind. Diametric to man, but malleable. Given enough time it can adapt. To maximize this chance, monsterkin pair bond. Increased exposure speeds the process of adaption. It's hyper focused because each man is onto himself a separate entity.”

I've just about lost my patience and was nearly strangling Vee with his collar as if it were piano wire.

“You are blinded by love. A purely chemical process. Monsters, while they possess the form of women, have no souls. That's a uniquely divine property. It's lust. Sexual reproduction with no logical end. Longevity without procreation is a dead-end survival strategy. A slow death. It's Lilith's ploy to end the world!”

A hundred memories flashed before my eyes at once. Along with it was a hideous though, a painful doubt. Were they all fake? Could that be a possibility? It was a thought which hurt. A squeeze of the heart which felt real. My grip on Vee loosened.

“But I can stop it!” Vee exploded with enthusiasm, with an actual hint of emotion to his voice. “She's used abyssal energy to reshape her world and has set it on a collision course with our own. But she doesn't have complete control. I can crack the code. I can take a piece of it for my own. The ancients, the Elders, they almost accomplished the same. They merely failed to account for the beasts that reside there. IT consumed them. The gods condemned them for it. I can right that ancient wrong. The child can surpass the father... Just open your eyes, Mr. Laven.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. My flood of memories

passed me by and when I opened my eyes they were calm. But Vee's pleading face, the slight curl of optimism faded quickly as he studied whatever new glint there was in my eyes.

“Wha—is that how—how is that?”

For being someone who couldn't shut up, the man suddenly found himself at a loss for words. So was I, because a familiar whine ripped us from our conversation. Babel sprung back to life and continued to gather energy. It's a third participant which truly brought Vee and I's dialogue to a close.

“*** ***** **** ***,” came a strange disembodied voice.

It wasn't any language I knew. The voice sounded artificial. Unnatural and certainly not alive. Almost robotic. Spoken as if through a tunnel, echoing from some other place. Vee seemed to have an idea what it is... And it brought him to tears.

“Elder Tongue... Could it be possible?”

“*** ******* ********** * ** ******,” spoke the voice.

I couldn't put my finger on it, but there is something eerily familiar about it. Almost as if this strange language is some paradoxical mashing together of every language. The end product was something that sounded like a white noise. When I turned to see whence it came, the source appeared to be the crushed console. Some sort of emergency backup?

“No one... No one has heard these words for over ten-thousand years...” Vee said, with tears now streaming down his face. “Mr. Laven. Put me down at once. This is an opportunity we simply can't—”

He shut right up the second I laid my eyes on him.

“Now—let's be civil here. I—I'll reverse to process. I need only the chance to speak with—”

My response was to tighten my grip once more. Far past the point of sanity, the Professor couldn't hold back a laugh.

“Of all the vices... Wroth does not suit you.”

“I disagree,” I replied.

There's no way I'm going to forget what Vee has done. Not what he did me, but also Yaleria. And not just what he did today, but also what he's done to countless others. Images of patchwork girls strapped to tables and ruthlessly tortured to expiration were at the forefront. Were those golems back in Domdracveria the same? I could not imagine it being anyway else. So I tightened my grip around his coat collar with one hand and then grabbed hold of his belt with the other.

“How about we take everything you've said and put it to an experiment?”

A pitiable cry came from Vee as I hoisted the lanky feather-weight above my head.

“It isn't real because it's 'a flow of hormones', right? Then this shouldn't be a problem. If love isn't real, then neither is pain—so how about you make your point by crawling back up here!”

I had wanted to do this the moment he kicked me down the stairs. I tossed Vee like a rucksack back over the edge. He got good air time before connecting with one of the steps a quarter of the way down the stairs. His scream turned into a pained howl along with the chorus of thumps and bumps. I peered over the edge and I saw the flesh slinky came to a stop at the bottom. He could still move, but not in a way I'd define as healthy. One of his knees bent completely in the wrong direction. I could not tell much from this distance, but that seemed to be far from the last thing broken. Worse yet, he hadn't gone completely into shock and was still very much conscious. No one could scream in pain like that if he wasn't. I also sensed a degree of bewilderment and confusion, as if this is the first time the man had experienced pain.

“**** ******* *** ********** **”, the voice announced for a third time.

Along with the crackling of mana, the time I had wasted on Vee came back to bite me. I threw myself before the shattered console and got to work figuring out what the hell is going on and how to stop it. The blue sphere had already begun to shift from a bright cyan to a navy blue.

“I don't know who, or what, the hell you are. But shut this shit down!” I commanded.

A moment of silence.

“**** ****** * ****** **”, the voice replied.

“In Eng—In anything else!”

“*** ** *****,” it said, unchanging.

This called for a different approach. And fast.

“Can you understand me?”

“**** **** ******* **.”

“Yes or no!?”

“****.”

And that's when the idea finally came to me. I'd have to test it though.

“Answer with yes, or no... A square has four equal sides and four right angles.”

“****.”

Same reply. I rattled off whatever true statements came to mind and got the same sounding word in return. I'd have to trust there wasn't a break down in communication. It could clearly understand me, but I could not understand it. There isn't any time to figure out why that is.

“Alright. Now we are getting somewhere... The ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter is exactly three.”

“**.”

A couple more of those and I think I got what could count as a definitive no. Now came the moment of truth. I had to command, negotiate, whatever, the shutdown of this impending disaster.

“Babel... If that is your name. Can you cease this—this mana concentration?”

“**.”

“What?” I blurted out with anger. “Why the fuck not?”

It began to explain itself, “********** ******** **** ****** * ****

**** ***__”

“No, stop. I don't have time to hear it. I don't understand it anyways... Wait, you are a network aren't you? Babel isn't just one system?”

“****.”

It was a long shot, but perhaps I could diffuse all this mana so it wouldn't have the same disastrous result. Who knows though? It could also make things worse. That's a possibility. It could merely spread the disaster, but I didn't have the time to figure that out. I had to do something. Anything.

“Then if you can't get rid of it, and you can't reverse it, diffuse it across the system.”

I watched as the dismembered voice take shape. Not as any entity, but as a series of strange runic symbols. A type of cuneiform, if I had to try putting a finger on it. It projected like a hologram above the console, above where I had driven Nerick's mace into the surface.

“***** *** **** ********* **. ********** * ********* ** ****.”

“I don't think I like that answer,” assuming I had gotten a negative answer. “Why the hell not?”

The holographic projection morphed from speech to text into a sphere. Or rather, a globe. Lines etched and snaked their way across its surface into what I assumed were coastlines. It's precision didn't look anything like some ancient map, but satellite geography. It zoomed in on one particular area of a northernmost continent. It had a rough U shape to it that reached up onto the globe's northern pole. I quickly recognized the general topography. A crescent shaped mountain range and a flashing amber light that announced itself as a 'you are here' sign.

From that one location, a series of lines, a grid, spread across the surface. The image zoomed back out further and further until the whole globe was visible once more. The lines floating just above the surface of the three-dimensional image looked a lot like magnetic field lines. And that flashing amber light sat right at a point where six lines intersected. One by one, the areas where lines met, sometimes only four and a few eight in total, began to flash amber and red. One actually is still green. Toward the south-east on the same continent... The capital of the Empire... If I recalled correctly. And a painting I had

once seen came to mind. A series of hills, with plenty of towers far higher than the medieval town built in what looked like a very ancient foundation.

And to the north, where the mountain ranges looked very familiar, four lines met where a red light held steady, unlike other which flashed. A desert region. Far to its east what looked like a salt plain, barren steppes to the south and tundra far to its north. A number of things became clearer, but it also posed more questions... But what I could judge from the whole is that this network had suffered considerable decay.

A chill in the air precluded a color shift which swept across this tower's crown. The sphere rotating in place above my head had finally shifted from dark blue to purple. Even now it fast approached the deathly black it had reached prior to collapsing and releasing all its energy in one tragic burst. For now it contented itself with lashing out with whips of lightning. Its constant roaring of thunder putting my nerves on edge. My hands began to shake as thoughts of an immanent blast were more pressing than before.

Time had taken its toll on Babel. Not only is it incomplete, but fragmented. There didn't appear to be much I could do as the sphere grew increasingly unstable as it got larger and tone shifted toward violet. Maybe if I knew what this damn thing was built for in the first place. It could cause so much destruction, but I still didn't think that could have been its primary function. If it's meant to function as such in any capacity. That sphere looked far too unreliable to be used as a weapon.

My eyes were drawn back to the map and far to the south, past the planet's equator. On the opposite shore of an expansive ocean was a smaller continent. And down there I saw a place where eight lines met. It didn't have a red light, like most of the others, but a yellow one. One of the primary nodes on these so called ley lines. A rogue thought crossed my mind. I recalled a bit of research Susan had done a month ago. One with wall etchings in peculiar shapes. Their designs were far too coincidental. Another long shot, but I had a good feeling about this one.

“Babel, or whatever it is you go by,” I said as I jabbed my finger through the holographic display and highlighted the node in question. “Here. This place. What is its function?”

“********* *** ******* ****,” it explained in tongues.

“Don't tell me, show me. Fuck it!” I yelled, and began tracing my finger through the air. “Monoceros... Orion... Taurus. You know these, don't you? Why?”

The voice was silent.

“Why, Babel? Tell me why! Shoe me!”

“...**** **** ***** ****.... ****? **?”

Those last two sounded like actual questions. There isn't anything I'd know that it would want to, so it must be asking for confirmation. I glanced up and spied that the sphere had grown near to the size it had before when it collapsed and shot out entirely as a bolt of deadly lightning.

“Yes, dammit, yes! Anything! Hurry!”

The ground rumbled beneath my feet once more. I had to grab hold of the console to stay on my feet as it did. Once more, as before, the Stonehenge formation rotated into yet another configuration. A thunderclap that momentarily deafened me roared. Nine tendrils of lightning shot out from the sphere into nine of the tallest stones. I watched with my heart nearly beating fast enough to rip free from my chest as the sphere of mana shifted from violet back to a healthy blue. Yet that hideous whine did not stop, it merely changed to a different pitch. And now there were lines snaking their way across the grooves in the stone. It looked a lot like the incident in the tomb, right before that Lich was unsealed.

Although that sphere had turned back to blue, it began to grow even larger now. Before I could take it as a sign of despair, the whine came to an abrupt end. Everything remained still for a second before a surge of energy blasted through the sky. Not a streak of lightning, but as a blast of magical energy streaking up toward the sky. It tore right through cloud of ash. From that hole, a halo of sunlight illuminated Babel. It cast aside the ash with such force, that an expanding ring of blue sky is quickly unmasking.

A smile actually returned to my face, because I could once again see the sun. It gradually faded as that mid day blue started going dark.

***

Sulunaerg's outer ground had bared the brunt of a force like that of a vengeful god. Soldiers and knights were still trying to pick up the pieces after being tossed about as rag dolls by the hurricane winds that blew one way and then the other. As suddenly as it arrived, the wind had vanished. And not long after the initial blast, a rain of ash and fire followed suit. Darkness blotted out the sun, fires raged and all the while everyone caught underneath struggled to keep their heads above the proverbial water and stay alive.

Malco's remaining forces retreated into the inner keep. Aaron's forces desperately funneled into the outer walls for safety. Other remained in the camp down below, the rest took refuge with the civilians in the city. No one as far as Sulunaerg knew what was happening at the Brightkeep anymore. Half the tower had sloughed off and collapsed to the earth. A huge ivory tower protruding out from its insides.

A group of soldiers were fast at work at one of the castle's walls. Ropes were tied and men tugged with all their might to pull large stones from a pile of rubble. One by one they were rolled off the pile until what lay trapped beneath them all was released from its prison. Much to their collective horror, the prisoner stirred once they had released one of its arms. The jet black gauntlet thrashed about and forced the Count's men to flee. Under its own power, the arm dislodged the last remaining boulders and released the rest of the body along with it. A battered suit of black armour. A tinny howl shook the air as it raged against the last of the debris. His red light surveyed the damage.

“VEE!” It screamed and shook the air itself.

“S—sir,” one of Count Aaron's men stood at attention with buckling knees.

His arm likewise shook as it was raised in salute to lift his helm's visor. Aaaron's firy inhuman gaze swiveled down and did not help calm the lieutenant's nerves.

“Report,” Aaron nodded, albeit still seething.

“We've secured Sulunaerg... Everything except its main keep that is. We have guards holding Malco and the... the... whatever she is in the courtyard. Except none of us can get close in order to appre—”

“Forget about that broken Duke. We have more pressing

matters!”

“Sir! Yes, sir! We have tried organizing a reconnaissance team to investigate the strange tower, we doubt we'll hear back anytime soon. The roads have been washed away. Fires block the alternative roots. We've signaled the tower, but no one has responded.”

“I'll sort it myself!” Aaron bellowed. “I know who is responsible and I will tear his throat out from his backside.”

“This, Vee?” the lieutenant dared to ask.

Aaron ignored him and brushed him aside. Or rather, nearly ran him over and trampled him underfoot.

“I paid you a small fortune,” the Count growled under his breath as he bulldozed his way through his scattering ranks. “I promised you access to the Shadelands, so that you could sate your curiosity all you wanted. And you intended to bring ruin to MY lands all along? I'll crush your bones into powder. I don't care if no one else can reverse—this—and put me back in my body or not... I'll see you dead for this.”

His path to the castle's gate intersected with the place where Hyria had fallen upon the broken and drying body of the Duke. Neither of them appeared to have been budged an inch from the resulting carnage. His men had them surrounded, spear points ready, but no one dared to approach. Aaron had already decided to pay it no mind. She could take his corpse with her and slither away into whatever grave she came from for all he cared. So long as he had the black armor's power, she posed to threat. No one posed any threat. Not even the Imperial reinforcements.

Aaron had intended to squash the Duke and then have the other nobles fall in line. The Imperials, hard pressed with a hundred other worries, would be forced to accept the results of the coup before scurrying away to keep the Empire together elsewhere. That is his reasoning at the very least. Now he'd have to seize it by putting Yaleria back together again. He had the resources to do so. Even if it bankrupted him, the silver mines back home were far from empty and he would now be Duke. His family would have shaken off its shackles... And perhaps, one day, all the others.

A flutter of blonde hair in his peripheral caught his attention. It did not go unnoticed by all the soldiers as well. They braced and

readied their spears, but all Hyria did was crane her neck to look upon the tower in the distance. Bathed in blue light. Her pale corpse colored skin softened and a joyous smile replaced the sullen and mournful expression.

One more burst of light erupted from the ivory tower's crown. Gasps were heard all round as the gaggle of soldiers looked away and cowered in fear of the worst. The sound of buzzing magical energy washed over them. They cautiously watched as the ash clouds were blown away. They looked on in awe as a halo of light illuminated Babel.

It looked like a ray of hope to those choking under the oppressive volcanic clouds and forests burnt to cinders. Had it continued for much longer it would have elicited cheers from all those watching it. But the rays of sunlight were short lived. Blues skies quickly gave way to twilight. As quickly as the ash was blown aside, the blue skies turned black. Punctuated with a million tiny lights. Despite it still being a bit after noon, the heavens turned to night. The light of the sun had a filter put over it that forced it to shine no brighter than a full moon. It took less than a minute for the twilight to spread from one horizon to the other.

The next phenomenon for Yaleria to endure was a strange new rain. Blue light, falling like raindrops, pelted into the ground. And much like rain, the droplets extinguished the fires ravaging the landscape. Red firelight got replaced by a shimmer of blue, wherever the mana rained down.

Everyone watched in awe. Fear did not come immediately. But it came regardless, and the cause of it unrelenting. The first howls in horror came from far away. An echo carried on the wind from below. Echoing its way from the Count's siege encampment and all the way up to Sulunaerg. What could cause such distress was not lost on Aaron and his men for long.

Bursting up from one the castle's grassy knolls was a hand. A human hand, but stripped of flesh. It grabbed hold and pulled the rest of it up to the surface. Wherever the mana appeared to fall most heavily, something stirred and started to emerge from the ground. As the skull emerged, it lit on fire with a pale light. It's contours were unmistakably female. As it made contact with the air, it got covered by an ectoplasmic exterior, albeit uneven and not fully distributed. Full heads of healthy hair grew from their scalps. It likewise covered the torso, but with the occasional bone still exposed.

If their appearances were not enough to unsettle, the fact that they were all armed would. Rusted chain mail clung to boney limbs and curved feminine forms. Iron helms covered their heads where blue lights glowed in the eye sockets. In their arms were all manners of weapons and they were eager to use them. While the soldiers and knights scrambled to rally and get into formation, the undead ambushers struck hard and fast. They were more eager to knock their opponents down and begin to tear at their armor than deliver any fatal blows. Those who did not succumb to the first waves were helpless to come to the aid of their comrades as fresh warriors emerged to form rank against them.

None of them seemed interested in tackling Aaron at all. The black armored giant stood dumbfounded in the middle of the fray. He did not have the mind, nor the experience, to adjusted to the sudden shift in the battle and the new arrivals arrayed against him. But he did have an idea about who could be responsible. He recalled the look on Hyria's face a moment ago.

Aaron would have about-faced and carried on, but a whinny of a horse pried his attention forward. At the gates of Sulunaerg stood a terrifying sight. Blocking the only escape route was a skeletal warhorse complete with a thick layer of armored barding. Mist billowed out from its skull, despite it obviously not having to breathe. Seated on its back, a warrior wielding a lance. A mane of long white hair billowed down her back, her head completely hidden behind a spartan looking helmet, two large horns, which looked like wings, decorated it. A pair of blue lights burning in its sockets. The rest of her was adorned in armor which didn't appear to have aged at all. Although it also provocatively embellished every possible erogenous zone.

Unlike all the others, this one warrior in particular had her sights set squarely on the count. Now that she had his attention, she spurred her undead stead to a trot toward him. Another kick to the stead's sides and it quickly became a gallop. Her lance lowered and Aaron scrambled to summon a pair of swords to defend himself. But she didn't come anywhere close. The lance couched beneath her right arm grew to twice its length. It's extension was entirely non-physical, a projection of some magic origin. It shot out with enough speed to catch the Count by surprise as it went through his breastplate with ease. And there it stayed, snapping off the physical lance as she rode past.

It surely would have been a fatal blow if Aaron were still wholly human. The knight's lance would have pierced him straight through the

heart, but his heart no longer needed to reside in the center of his chest. Vee's armored suit reacted instinctively and shifted it to safety. Her lance did considerable damage, yet was not enough to topple him.

Seeing that her initial charge had failed, she reigned her skeletal horse to a stop and dismounted. Aaron staggered about as he smashed what had the consistency of glass off his chest. It shattered, fell upon the ground, and disintegrated back into mana and disappeared into thin air. Meanwhile, the knight approached with a warpick in one hand, slung over her shoulder and a large heater shield in the other.

She only came up to his chest, she wasn't anywhere near even six feet in height. Aaron had the advantage through and through. In a rage he lunged forward and swung one sword with all his might. Yet unlike the Duke, she did not fight him by evading. The knight angled her shield and took the brunt of the attack. It was easily parried off to the side and the opening allowed her to step in and deliver a devastating blow to his chest with the flat of the pick's hammer. The black armor crumpled on impact. A forceful blow which had Aaron reeling backwards. His opponent possessed an unholy strength common to undead elite.

Aaron had been relying on brute strength and the specs of his armor to overwhelm his foes, without care for his lacking ability to put up a fight. Now he faced someone who could muster enough strength to endure his blows. She obviously had years more experience, centuries perhaps. So too was her armory comprised of weapons with magical enchantments which could stop his abyssal weapons in their tracks. The knight advanced and pushed the black Juggernaut back. Blow after blow crumpled his armor faster than it could regenerate. Once he could no longer offer any resistance, once he had fallen to his knees, the knight switched from the hammer to the pick and delivered a mortal blow to his helm.

Yet he still lived. The knight wrenched the pick free from the skull, but no blood stained it nor did any flow.

“You are a miserable sight to behold,” came a voice from behind the knight's helm.

A voice which would have belonged to a chipper and upbeat school girl than a battle hardened knight. She turned her back and strode away. There would be no other time to strike, but Aaron could not move. A circle of skeletal warriors giggled menacingly as they

closed in from all sides, but he could not move. Tried as he might he was nothing more than a consciousness suspended in an iron suit. The only thing that could move is the singular red eye. And that quickly zeroed in on someone he least expected. It was Vee.

Before he could pounce, if he could have, the image flickered once before speaking, “This has been previously recorded, my dear Count. I left this message behind on the chance that you would somehow manage to render yourself inoperable... A most unfortunate state of affairs.”

Aaron could at least still speak, although his voice came out more distorted and dissonant than usual “Vee! You rat bas—”

“What is more unfortunate is that I cannot allow my work to fall into the hands of others. Its inner workings are strictly confidential to all but members of Ouroboros... But you agreed to this beforehand, if you recall.”

A couple of the skeletons had already gotten their hands on him and were trying to tear open the armor and find out what was inside. He could do nothing to stop it.

“It is therefore the pinnacle of misfortune that we must part ways like this. We shall not meet again. In this world, or the next.”

Aaron could not decipher the last of that cryptic farewell, not before the end came. The girls surrounding him felt it as well, and sensing danger, fled. He had not felt pain, not in a visceral sense since donning this form. Now he could feel it again. And not a physical prick, but one which was wholly mental. A product of his mind.

From the joints in his armor light began to shine. Limb by limb his hollow armor began to implode. A painful experience he could not let out a scream for. He was nothing but a trapped mind inside a steel cage which was rapidly shrinking. Fast approaching a singularity that centered around his still human heart.

Up until the very last moment, he remained there, kneeling on the ground with shriveled limbs and crushed torso. And at the last, the implosion reversed in a brilliant flash of light. Much like the explosion that rocked Yaleria, Aaron was obliterated, leaving nothing but an empty sphere in the earth, a bang, and a short lived shock wave of force.

***

Day gave way into night. Those blue skies I had hoped would return vanished as quickly as they had come. Out from the tower and into heaven a steady stream of blue light scorched the day away. In its wake twilight remained. A million points of light dotting the sky. An entirely unfamiliar constellation of stars. It took me a few seconds to realize this was not yet another alien sky, but those stars that were not meant to be seen in a few seasons' time. Some manner of magical filter had been plastered over it.

I watched as the twilight spread. From my vantage point high up in the tower I could see dawn, or dusk, a hanging by Yaleria's edge. The whole land had been plunged into darkness. The Shadelands too, because the mist that obscured it was rapidly diminishing. A rain of blue painted the landscape and made it appear as if a billion fluorescent flowers had bloomed. It went so far as to extinguish the flames engulfing much of Yaleria, illuminating the land with a blue hue.

It was a beautiful spectacle to behold, but ugly curses from below brought me back. Down below I saw Vee had managed to drag his body across the floor and toward a shining light. A tube containing bottled lightning. The same one which had tumbled down the stairs before him. With it finally in his grasp, the mad Professor slapped it into his wrist device which sprung back to life. He rolled over onto his back, his face covered in blood, eyes full of hatred.

“A mana leak... All this power, wasted!” Vee screamed at me. “ Ouroboros will have its way with you, Laven. Next we meet, I will make you pay for what you have done.”

The ground shifted for a third time. This time it did not feel intentional. One side of the tower sunk by a couple inches and was accompanied by a sickening crack. It nearly knocked me off my feet. Vee laughed manically. He understood what is happening a few seconds before I did.

“If we meet again!”

And much like when I first met him, the man became consumed by lightning. In a flash he vanished. Vanished into thin air. Some manner of travel I could not begin to wrap my head around. A kind of teleportation? Whatever it was he's gone now. And that left me stranded on what appeared to be a crumbling tower. The consequences of smashing that green crystal appeared to be catching up with me. I had smashed half of it, so now half the tower is gonna to

crumble? There's no way I'd survive a fall from this high up.

Another crack echoed up from below. The fissures followed suit and the whole crown keeled a little further to the right. The Stonehenge formation on that side were already beginning to fall off the side. Any further and I might follow along. It started with only happening every few seconds, but now it was a constant droning in my ear as this place fell apart.

“Did you at least save the day?” I asked myself.

Babel didn't respond either. Whatever system that I spoke with was too far gone itself. If it had been using all the mana to power itself, there is certainly none to be had now. All of it shot off into space and came raining back down across the land. Enough mana to be of use, thankfully.

A portal opened before my very eyes. A blue colored pool which reflected nothing. Emerging from it came a woman. A familiar mop of blue hair, poked out first, followed by the form of a woman... One I knew... Intimately. It was more decent than before. She wore what looked like a one piece swimsuit with thigh high boots all wrapped up in a billowing cloak instead of a tattered burial cloth. In her right hand she clasped an ornate and gem encrusted staff which pulsated with magic. An obvious focus of her power.

She did not appear happy to see me... That could be her neutral expression. It still had a hint of purple to her bluish cheeks. Might be the addition of a bit of red—

In mid thought, and with no time to say hello, the lich prodded me in the chest with the tip of her staff. She's a lot stronger than she looked, because that alone is enough to push me off my feet and backwards. I had nothing to brace my back foot on though. I feel over backwards. The stairs weren't behind me, the wall was. And I didn't hit my back on the ground either. As I fell I saw a similar portal, but this time it stood out as real among a sea of blue light. It did not take long for it to vanish from sight. Nor did I spend much time in what had to be some manner of interdenominational space. My back hit something solid, the ground, soon enough.

The sensation of falling through a thousand miles of empty space ended abruptly. After coming out the other side my muscles felt as though they had been atrophied by a year of being bed ridden. The world of blue had vanished got replaced with color once more. My

landing was more forceful than I would have asked for, taking my injuries into consideration. At least there's grass and dirt underneath me instead of stone... And above me a bunch of curious onlookers looming over me. Their eyes glowed blue, their arms were... bone?

They giggled and teased one another as they kept stealing glances back at my helpless form below them. What they did when they dared to move, I don't know. My vision narrowed until I lost my last ounce of strength.

Chapter 106

I felt trapped, but a warm embrace soothed me. My face felt cold, yet nothing else had been forced to brave the elements. Above me stood a canopy of pine trees and a clear night sky higher still. It made me feel small and vulnerable A crackling fire at my feet made my feet sweat, but it was a welcome bastion against what would abject darkness all around me. I wrestled back and forth against my prison walls and discovered my immobility is due to some sort of bag... My rustling caused an odd noise, a familiar one... Like nylon rubbing together.

“What? You need to go already?” came a raspy and weathered voice beside me. “I told you to do it before I tucked you in there, didn't I?”

Being stuck as I was, terror is the first rush of emotion that struck me. There would be no way I could run or hide. Yet as I turned to see whom had spoken, the man's expression dismissed any thought of danger. Its contours were sunken, wrinkled, but behind them shone two crystal clear eyes of a radiant blue. They belied a vigor that the rest of his aged body shouldered.

I could not respond. My mouth is shut tight as if stitched together. That did not seem to concern the old man who sat cross legged in front of the fire. Content in knowing that I was not about to burst a bladder, the old man prodded the camp fire with a stick. He stirred it within the pit and gave it new life. Once satisfied that it would remain healthy through the night, he turned his attention back to an assortment of mechanical parts arrayed on a cloth before him. I could not make of the model, but it appeared to belong to some manner of long rifle.

“Did I wake you? Sorry about that. Old habits die hard, after all,” He said with a wry grin, disparaging his own age.

I very much wanted to say something. Anything. The first would be to ask for his name. That much I could not do, because it felt as if I had a serious case of lockjaw. Neither could I raise anything audible from my throat. I was trapped. Caged in more ways than one. I eventually gave up and stared at the stars.

“That's how people used to get around, dont'cha know?” the elderly man said, starting a lecture, using the disassembled barrel as a teacher's rod “See that big one over by the horizon? The one right

above the peaks over yonder? North Star. Wont move the entire night. You'll always know which was is north with that one... All the others have got their place too. All you got to know is the season and you can know which group of them ought to be where. That's how you can get the other four directions."

He raised his liver spotted hand up as far as it could go and began waving his hand about. Methodically, measuring the distances across the sky using his fingers as a tool.

"You can fine tune it if you use your hand like this. Width of your fingers to measure degrees in the sky... But all this can wait till tomorrow night. When you are aren't so tired after the hike up here. Because if you listen well, you'll never have to worry about being lost again."

There is something familiar about the man's face. I could not put my own finger on it and there's nothing I could do but stare at him. His white hair, bald completely on the top with two patches around the ears alone, danced in the wind.

"Follow the stars and you can always find your way back home." he said, returning a kind gaze and a simple smile.

***

My eyes shoot open, not because they had witnessed a nightmare, but greedily wished to see the dream for themselves. Rather than being treated to the truth, my conscious mind is rewarded with the sensation of imprisonment and claustrophobia. I should have expected no less. My dream had no doubt been triggered by my body's actual predicament.

I could hardly move my listless body and my eyes were overly sensitive to light. Add on top of that my vision is blurry and I couldn't make out my hand even if I could hold it up to my face. I could sense the rising of my chest with shallow breaths, the feeling of a soft downy comforter and a pillow behind my head, but I couldn't muster the strength to move a single limb. The best I could muster was to clenched my fingers and toes. My elbows, knees, hips and shoulders replied in kind with dull pain. Which I'm actually thankful for, because otherwise I could never know if were still dreaming.

That itself is a whole other matter. I've had plenty of dreamless sleeps these past couple of months. Practically every night is me falling asleep to the sight of stars and waking up—a second later—to

the rising sun. This time, however, this time I can still see that sagely old man's face. It came with a profound sense of nostalgia and comfort, yet I could not for the life of me figure out who he was. Granted I could not remember anything from anytime. But that only served to make this one stick out like a sore thumb. One open port in a roiling sea of confusion. If pressed I could generally explain the inner workings of an internal combustion engine, but I couldn't tell anyone how or where I celebrated my tenth birthday.

Not since waking up in that apartment could I recall anything personal. Nothing connected to me personally inside that slab of dilapidated concrete that had to have been my home at some point. But I couldn't take offence to it being unceremoniously dropped in some ditch. A ditch hidden away in a remote northern forest. A forest located in some whole other world. My daily routine dulled that unease over time. A hundred other problems, several of which try to kill me every so often, always take priority. But that dream had it come rushing back to me. It's a profound sense of loss. Something, or someone, had hollowed me out. It began to hurt. That pain quickly became something my body could ever hope to muster.

One by one my other senses came back to me as I lamented my condition. My eyes adjusted to the dark and I stared at the stone ceiling above. Hanging above the bed was quite an ornate chandelier complete with exquisitely crafted wax candles. On my tongue I could taste a hint of iron. What dashed the monotony and the dread away was some chipper humming. It belonged to someone with an unusually high pitched voice, and I'm positive I could tell who it is by eavesdropping on a couple bars.

With one eye open I spied Ba'el seated on a wooden high-rise chair. It's much too high for her short stature. She kicked her hooves out playfully while she busied her paws with what appeared to be some sort of doll. Grasped firmly in one hand and with a needle and thread in the other. As my eyes acclimatized to the strange light. At the same time lacking and abundant. I could clearly make out that the doll had its own little set of horns on top of its head.

Her head bopped side to side as her body swayed mirthfully—in tune with each other—as she worked. She had shed her cloak and mantle, which made her look smaller, and replaced it with a worryingly translucent silk teddy. How revealing it was came in close second to concerns over who tailored sensual underwear like that in that size.

I pursed my eyes together to refocus, away from the bare skin,

and back to her sewing. She didn't appear half bad... The doll itself looked a bit crude and rudimentary, no more than a rag doll. And given the choice of wool, dyed as it were, it had to be a little replica of herself.

Her smiled glowed brighter than the candlelight as she raised it up high, turned it side to side and inspect her handiwork. And what a short lived cute and innocent smile it was. The next second it twisted into a mischievous lip curling grin.

"Perfect," She said, praising herself. "Now we add the finishing touch—"

She held one claw up to the rag doll's forehead which crackled and pulsed with a purple glow. First came the circle, next a series of triangles and runic language within it. But she quickly lost focus after catching me stare from the corner of her eye. The claw which had been deftly drawing some manner of magic circle stopped in mid process. Following that was a pop, fizzle and the spell fell apart. I watched as the circle shattered into a thousand tiny particles of purple light.

Ba'el's expression was a complicated thing to unpack. At first it had that grin, which immediately morphed into a wide eyed surprised. Then it became what I might have mistaken as a smile, but she remembered what she had just been doing, whatever it was, and flustered into a panic.

"L-l-laven! You're—" She stuttered, her voice cracking from yelling.

Raising her voice louder than she intended, the daemon shut herself up quick.

"Ehehehehe," she laughed nervously. "What a pleasant surprise—and a night too early."

That last bit she muttered quietly under her breath and I couldn't quite make it out, so I had to ask:

"Nice doll. You conjure that up on your own?"

She puffed out her cheeks and protested, "Nothing meant to last is made from pure magic. It's transient. I've spent the last little while making it specifically for—Never mind that!" Ba'el cut herself off before motor mouthing too much.

“Where did you learn that? It's out of character, for you.” I ignored her objections and pushed her buttons some more..

“Not everyone growing up in an orphanage is meant for the nunnery. They make you cook and clean and sew and a buncha' other worthless crap. You pick up a few things here and there. Of course I'd manage to whip something up from some sweat shop—Hey, quit it!”

It's almost too easy. She can't not sing her own praises with the slightest provocation. Karma caught up to me soon enough, however, and I regretted trying to talk so much. Trying to work my lungs, mouth and tongue all together at once seemed to be too much of a load on the old circuit breaker. I sent myself into a coughing fit.

“Slow down there, Tiger,” Ba'el commanded. “You ain't in any position to be moving about... Even if you're excited to have rendezvoused with little old me.”

Coy as always, but I could also spy something which told the truth more reliably. Her tail was sticking out through the back of the chair and it's wagging back and forth excitably. She was sharp enough to pick up the subtle shift in my eyes toward it. That's when Ba'el became aware of it herself, hopped up out of her seat and sat down on top of it. From where I lay, the sound of crinkling bones could not be unheard.

Now her smile became strained. Grinning like a Cheshire cat, the corners of her mouth tweaked and twitched as she tried to stifle the pain. Anything to avoid admitting a moment of weakness and surrender the upper hand. I would have laughed, but the blanket covering me felt like it's made of lead instead of down feathers. My instincts screamed at me to throw it off, so I'd sit up straight and—

“Oh, no you don't!” Ba'el said as she leaped out of her chair and pounced on top of the bed.

A king sized bed, but it didn't take long for her to bound across it with her hooves and dive straight into me. She laid me flat out. Then there was the awkward moment as she straddled me, on her knees and pinning me to the bed by my shoulders.

“If you had any idea how delicate all the strings holding you together right now are—”

I let slip a little, worried and inquisitive wheeze in response. It

didn't take long for her to realize the gravity of her situation perched right on top me and that strange mix of both surprise and happiness turned back to an evil grin.

“Buuuut~ We need to let your wounds breathe a little right?” She said, releasing my shoulders from her grip, but wriggling her claws as if she were groping the air.

I still couldn't speak, now with the hundred pound or so straddling me, so I shook my head and tried to communicate 'no thank you' the best I could. She produced a tin pan from thin instead. An impressive tick and execution with slight of hand... if she had sleeves to have hidden it away in.

“Or maybe it's time to empty you out again?”

She reached back and gave the bedspread a good old squeeze where my lower body is.

“Well, your circulation has improved.” She said with a wild eyed grin. “Oh, maybe you were a little too excited to see me again. I can't blame you. Pent up as you are, and me being me—”

Her becoming more sex crazed by the second came to an abrupt end as her right ear twitched in response to some noise my own human ones couldn't pick up. She deflated rather fast and slowly crawled off of me. Rather than rush to take a deep breath, I sighed what I had out of me with relief.

“Right. Straight to business it is then,” Ba'el said as she clopped her hooves across the stoney floor. “I know you're gonna have quite a few questions, so let's get those right after you know the basics of what mess we're in now.”

I craned my neck a bit to keep track of her with my eyes as she paced back and forth along the right side of my bed, toward the foot and back again to its side.

“I need you to relax and listen... And try not to panic. You've been First thing you probably want to know is how long you've been out... I'm afraid it has been... nine years.”

I couldn't feel much, but I could feel the color drain from my face. Our eyes met in a deadlock and I could feel each individual thump in my chest, which came faster and faster. She looked at me with a dead serious expression, but it cracked as her lips curled and

her eyebrows knit together as it failed to keep everything else in line.

“Ha! Nah, I'm just fucking with you... It's been a week.”

If only I could drag my ass out of this bed right now... My heart rate fell straight off a cliff and back to normal and I could feel the flow of blood back into my cheeks. No doubt they tinted red with embarrassment at having gotten so worked up over that prank of hers. She came around to the side of the bed again, jumped up and sat on the side, twisting her torso toward me and slapped her paw against my knee.

“I told you to relax, didn't I? That part I'm serious about. There was so much magic coursing through you after picking you up. Your body shoula' burst at the seams long ago.” She began to count the number of ways on her fingers, “A renewing blessing from our resident tight-wad, background necrotic energies from her highness and her blueberry aide, some alchemical healing solution, background abyssal energy, background magical energy—extra pure—some real nasty stuff, might I add... Oh, and some high altitude solar radiation. I honestly don't know how you are still alive. Every time I crunch the numbers you should be a pile of hamburger meat keep together with some butcher's string.”

Next she produced what looked like a doctor's clipboard, no doubt with the list of ailments jotted down on it.

“Broken sixth and seventh ribs—right side. Fractured collar bone. Countless muscle tears—both micro and macro. Strained knee ligaments. Bruised thirtieth and fourteenth vertebrae... Need I go on?” She said tossing the clipboard aside without a care. I never did hear it hit the ground either...

“You are not saying that I'm dying, are you?” was the first coherent sentence I managed to push out.

“Oh, no, nothing like that. I would be the one in a panic if that were true. The price I pay hitchhiking on some mortal's life force... But you're a young man still, we can put you back together... Been slow though. What makes you so resilient to... Well whatever it is you went though also makes it harder to put you back together. We managed to treat all the hemorrhaging and knit the bones, but the muscles will take some time to heal up on their own. That's why you need to stay put, right where you are. One wrong move and you could pull out the proverbial stitching.”

So I wasn't going to be moving anytime soon. Somehow I've managed to dodge another bullet. Freed from the confines of my own worries, they scattered to the winds and swept across everything else and to everyone else.

“What about everyone else?”

“Everyone else? Not going to ask about little ol' me?” Ba'el said with a pout.

“I can see you are perfectly alright,” I chided her.

“Perfect, eh~he~he~he, damn straight,” she said as she razzed me with her tongue, but cleared her throat and continued once catching me glare at her. “No one is dead, if that's what you're worried about... And no one is missing any limbs either or anything tragic like that. We all got a bit banged up, but we're holding together alright.”

“Then—”

“Where is everyone? Doctor's orders... And our hostess' not so subtle, yet polite, threats... We're not to crowd 'round while you recover. Too much noise, too boisterous, almost a fight here and there. Choking up all the fresh air... The hot-head ought to be getting some bed rest like you. Lost a lot of blood. Like almost all of it... But she's running around picking fights at a drop of the hat right now. Claiming its training and what not... I know you wouldn't know, but when you are not around, stressed out worrying about you, and she's hungry on account of all that blood she's gotta replace... She can be a real bitch.”

“I can't picture it.”

“Well, lucky you,” Ba'el said as she rolled her eyes. “So we've been rotating shifts to watch you laying there... Strict non-interference policy... Except thunder tits. She got an important mission. Flying back up north to deliver a message... She should be back soon with the response.”

“And the other—”

“—Two?” She slipped in before I could finish. “Bitch Prime has been studying your condition in the library and meeting with the blueberry tart to talk it over. That is whenever she doesn't hog this room all to herself to maintain your healing regimen.”

Ba'el looked a bit sour, mimicking Susan's speaking pattern, as

she mentioned the last part. I'd say she looked as if she were a bit skeptical as well.

“And as for that shadow of yours...”

She motioned her head, and gaze, over to the left side of the room. I followed and saw a couch up against the far wall, adjacent to the door. Curled up and sleeping softly is Minte. Wearing nothing but her stockings and... One of my button up shirts which was far too large for her. She appeared to be fine, but her arm scythes were wrapped up completely in bandages. Another one was wrapped around her forehead. A few gauze patches were covering up which might have once been bruises and cuts here and there over her body.

“Now that one... That one doesn't have a social life,” She said, wagging her finger toward her. “Like, at all. You ought to try doing something about it.” Clicking her tongue with disapproval.

Minte being there is what Ba'el noticed a few minutes ago. Right before she got a hold of herself, quieted down and bottled up all that sexual frustration. I gave Minte my silent prayer of thanks, the only reaction out of her this whole time being her soft breathing a couple twitches from her antennae... But now that I thought about it a second time, why is she wearing one of the few shirts I still have left?

“Last time I saw Rose she was about to square off with some tachi wielding maniac, but what happened to Minte?”

“An Exile, trained in some ancient lost martial arts or somesuch. Put up quite a fight considering her opponent has spent the last forty years being a ruthless killing machine. Minte ain't exactly an unknown element, even if its all rumors. You go around murdering people for that long and you end up leaving behind a few stories here and there.”

“Exile, what do you mean by that?”

“Descendents of those who escaped the last Monster Lord. The one that went on the genocidal crusade. Remember?. Judging from her face... I'd say from a gathering of warring states, far away, on the opposite coast of the eastern continent. Judging by the look of her, I'd say she ain't a pure blood. Green eyes, you see? Not many of those left, pure blooded Exiles that is.”

“I've heard about it at least once. But what's that have to do with the Bannermen?”

“About the Bannermen? Yeah, it does. About her being a redeemer? No, that part makes no-fucking-sense to me. I didn't exactly get to talk long with their second in command. The sorceress. Was hoping to pump some info out of her. She ended up being a slippery little devil. Best I could get is the Silvers are working overtime. Taking on a lot of jobs they usually couldn't be bothered with. They are piling up funds for something. Something big.”

“Don't like the sound of that,” I sighed.

“Don't be so hard on yourself. It's not like the whole world is gunning after you, so don't let it get to you down... Or make your head too big. It's the Bannermen. Adventurer types. Probably setting up a grand expedition to reclaim some long lost land. They do that. Reason why they got so many Exiles in their ranks. Taking back ancestral homelands... All under the supervision of the Church and Empire, of course.”

“Me being nothing more than a small fry... I'd love to believe that... Except I ran straight into their leader. And was gunning straight for me.”

Ba'el's playful grin melted right off. Replacing it was a sour expression. One heavy with concern.

“Nerick?” She asked.

“That's the one,” I replied.

“And?”

“Dead.”

“HA!” Ba'el let out a howl of laughter before getting control of herself again. “Seriously? You ain't fucking with me now, right? Oh, that sorcerer bitch is gonna be SO pissed... Probably heartbroken too... Dead though? As in you did him in?”

“Dropped a statue on him.”

“Crushed him to death?” Ba'el asked, skeptically, with a cocked eyebrow.

“Nah, that didn't kill him. I don't know how. He was wearing some serious magic armor. Protected his chest. Let's not fail to

mention him being drugged out of his mind. His body moved as if it didn't have limits. The very same limits that make it so you can't tear your muscles to pieces or shatter bone."

"So he's taking drugs for what you do naturally?"

"I can't lift a five ton statue after it's fallen on me," I snap back.

"Then it's not any ordinary a painkiller he was taking. That would have to be some serious magic narcotic... Illegal as hell too. So either the Church don't know it, or they are looking the other way... Would you say he was psychotic? As in: completely fucking mental?"

I didn't have to think about it long before saying, "Oh yeah."

"Oh yeah, they are not having him march in any parades. Black-ops materiel right there. The Church would raise one hell of a stink if you are handing out corrupting elements like that to your lieutenants... Maybe I should skulk around again and see if I could pick up a trace of it—How did he take it?"

"Smoked it."

"Fuck," She cursed and bit down on her thumb. "Of course they'd do it that way and make it impossible to trace... And buried under a mountain of rubble too."

A mountain of rubble. I'm positive I know what she is talking about. A moment before I fell unconscious myself, the tower had started buckling. Whatever had been keeping that impossibly tall tower together wore out soon after I smashed its power source. At least what I assumed was its power source.

"You mean Babel?"

Ba'el froze in place. Mere mention of the tower's name had an effect on her no different from hitting the power button on a remote designed just for her. The expression on her face went from whimsical to dire. I watched as her eyes snapped to attention and locked onto me. A great deal of weight dropped down onto my chest. I could feel the seriousness in her intent press down upon me like another blanket made of lead.

"Laven... Where did you learn that name?"

I was about to say The Bible, but I don't think the scriptures here went by that name. And I certainly don't think the those two books shared anything more than a superficial similarity. No, the one who I told me that tower's name was the mad man known as Vee.

“Ba'el, have you ever heard of a group called Ouroboros?”

“Snake eating its own tail, yeah? Ancient symbolism. See it show up all the time in Alchemical texts... Can't say I know of a group of people going by that name recently... But what does that have to do with—”

“Recently?” Words came stumbling out of my mouth, the connotations around that one word and what's at stake if my suspicions were true frightened me.

“Well—Wait—No. You're not trying to tell me.”

“Ba'el... That tower wasn't my idea.”

“It wasn't? I know I told you to go hog wild with the mana leak...And I still haven't properly thanked you for that, by the by,” She said aside, with a wink.

Now it was my turn to glare at her. The playful smile subsided once again. I watched the daemon trotter on over to the window, the one almost too high for her to look out of properly, and look outside. She let out a long sigh and began wrapping one of her twintails around her finger.

“It's a good thing you are still laying down then. Because I got some good news and some bad news. Some for now... and some for later. So what will it be first?.. Nah, you know what, screw it. I'll come full out and lay it on ya.” She turned around and pointed over to a clock hanging on the wall. “First of all, that ain't saying it's midnight. It's saying noon.”

“I don't think I follow,” I replied apprehensively.

“I think you do, Laven... You've bathed Yaleria in eternal darkness.”

“Come again?”

“I don't know what you did. And I'd love to hear all about it. But whatever it is you did, the whole of Yaleria hasn't seen sunrise in a

week. And we ain't talking illusions here. This is some reality warping super magic at work here."

There's no way I'd know how to process that bit of information.

"Now, that's the bad news. Good news being that you're now celebrity. A national hero."

Okay, now that's two pieces of information I can't begin to process in conflict with one another.

"Because that mana leaked seeped right into the soil. And up pops the now restless dead," Ba'el said as if she meant that horrifying statement to be complimentary. "And after checking again, there's about a hundred of them still waiting in the courtyard. Hoping to catch a glimpse, or hear you're alright."

"Can you slow this down, please?" I begged her to run that all by me again.

"And that's the good news!"

"How is that good news!"

Ba'el took a second to reconsider that. She pensively held her chin between her thumb and index claw.

"Hmm, they could get restless and try to get in here, now you mention it."

"That's not what I'm talking about," my voice cracked as I grew increasingly flustered.

"Quite a few nocturnal girls have been showing up too. We can't really stop being vigilant. This is bat country."

"Ba'el..." I said, sternly.

"This ain't something I can explain to you, so you're gonna have to see it for yourself... Let me help you sit upright. And take it easy, alright?"

With Ba'el's help I managed to bent my hips at a ninety degree angle. I immediately felt lightheaded as the blood pooling on my back rushed back down toward my feet. There's no way for me to know if my heart beat is due to that, or the sight which treated me as I looked out the window.

I managed to get my bearings with a few landmarks here and there outside the window, but the one dominating the landscape was a giant pillar of blue light. That's where Babel had been. Part of it remained, a bit short of half. Out from the crown was a spotlight, shining all the way up into the heavens. Scattered at its base was a hill, an artificial mountain of white stone. Slabs of all shapes and sizes. Babel had snapped clean in half, just like I had smashed that crystal. Half of it dust, the other half trapped inside that console.

True to her word, the time of day appeared to have no sway over the landscape. If that clock is accurate, the noon day sun should be traversing the sky. Right now there's nothing than a starry sky.

"The other good news is that we have nothing to worry about for the time being. You can lie there and rest till you are all better," Ba'el said reassuringly. "The bad news is that the Imperials and Church are all over this in record time. Seems like Count Aaron bit the dust, by became dust, but a cousin of his managed to wrestle control of the county. That's been reinforced by those of his army managed to high tail it out of here AND a contingent of the Imperial army... I don't think that peace is gonna last forever."

"No peace lasts forever," Boomed a voice from the window.

Squatting on the stool of the window was someone almost too large to fit through it. I recognized the silhouette and the billowing white scarf from anywhere. Chris had returned.

"Evil never sleeps, so too must Justice never—"

Her booming faux heroic voice came to a sudden stop like a record scratching.

"Master!" Chris' real voice squealed.

Somehow she managed to perform an act of masterful contortionism and slip her nearly seven foot frame, wings and tail through the window. She Forcefully seized my hands in the claws of her fore-wings. The girl could hardly contain herself. I could hardly avert my eyes from her breasts bounding up and down at my eye level.

"Oy! Thundertits, control yourself!" Ba'el complained as she tried peeking over one shoulder, then the other, unable to find a way to slip in edgewise.

Nothing could stop the escalation now. A gentle yawn rung out from behind. I would not have heard it had I not anticipated it would happen a mere moment before. I strained my neck to catch a glimpse of Minte raise her head and sit on her knees and backside from the corner of my eye. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and then the antenna on the top of her head sprung to full mast when she saw I was awake.

"Why the hell are you here if you just got back?" Ba'el yelled. "Go take care of your business, you over-sized carrier pigeon!"

"My master is my primary business!" Chris fired back as she tried to shake off the little devil crawling all over her.

They were beginning to wrestle a little too close for comfort. Then I looked back and saw that Minte had halved the distance from the coach to my bedside in an instant. My eyes were drawn back to the other side where Ba'el and Chris fought halfheartedly. Then I felt something poking the back of my head. Minte had already crawled onto the bed and wrapped her hands around my neck and pulled herself in close. The antenna prodding and sliding across my head while the other two were distracted.

Muted, but echoing down from the hall came a shrill cry of frustration, "I am confident I told you to report in immediately. Do not think you could have taken a moment in the dead of this endless night to—"

Nearly out of breath, sweating and disheveled, Susan came careening into the room. Her expression: furious. It did not last long. At first she looked shocked at the bedlam surrounding my bedside. She may have shattered glass with the scream she was prepared to let loose, but when she saw me that all went away. Her red eyes glistened, sparkled, and I think I almost spotted an outright full toothed smile. Yet she too is quick witted enough and manages to maintain control over her emotions. Within the long half second you have to bite one's tongue. Not that she could keep control of her tail, however. I opted not to mention it this time around.

"Everyone, control yourselves. Laven is still very much injured and we cannot have you crowding about and jeopardizing his recovery. And you," she pointed at Ba'el. "We agreed you would notify me when Laven awakens."

"I'm pretty sure I said sod off," Ba'el quipped back.

“That was certainly not a suggestion,” Susan growled. “Do not think for a moment I do not know what capers you've been concocting.”

The doll she had dropped behind her chair somehow managed to appear in Susan's paws. Ba'el looked back between the chair and Susan, her eyes wide with a mix of confusion and outrage.

“Hey! So it's you who've been pilfering them? I shoulda' known!”

Sparks flew where their gazes met each other. Ba'el climbed down off Chris' back and moseyed up toward Susan to take her on directly. The high difference made it hard to take seriously at a glance, but the weight of their two personalities squaring off made the air heavy.

“You've been leaving these enchanted dolls about in the hopes of managing a hypnotic suggestion. How debased, vulgar and selfish. You've been trying to invade Laven's dreams. And I am positive I know to what ends, you lewd avatar of sin!”

Ba'el clicked her tongue. Annoyed with Susan, but more-so angry at herself for getting caught. Nothing showed on her face that Ba'el regretted anything she tried to do.

“Oh, yeah. Like you are one to talk. Shooing everyone out of the room so you can properly heal our boy Laven here. Don't think I don't know what you're up to! I can smell it. And you leave the corner of the bed wet!”

Suan's face went beet red.

“How dare you!” Susan howled with indignation. “One more pernicious fib from that maw of lies and I shall strike it down with yet another word of power: silence.”

“Yeah, well, this here is for you, power word: insult... Piss off, ya cunt!”

Their faces got closer and closer, with Susan behind down and Ba'el levering herself on the tips of her hooves, until their foreheads met and were grinding their skulls against one another.

“At least things haven't gotten any worse while I was out,” I muttered aloud to myself.

Sure, things were a little heated now, but within tolerable limits... And on the matter of heat, the temperature rise wasn't figurative. I could feel a few beads of sweat soak into the mattress and bed spread. Of course I wouldn't pick up on it till it's too late. The heat kept getting more intense and became almost unbearable as I heard something scrapping stone from the hallway.

Rose came skidding into the room at full tilt, enough to send sparks flying not only from her tail, but from her talons scrapping against floor. Unlike the others, she could not restrain herself, not even a little. Her smile was shining at a million watts and the fire on her tail ratcheted up another order of magnitude.

“Laven!” She screamed in delight.

I looked left and I looked right. My body pressed up against the headrest of the bed. There's nowhere for me to go. Not that I could move my body enough to make my escape for what my animal instincts warned me was imminent. None of the other girls had time to react either. They had barely processed that Rose had come barreling into the room before she kicked off the ground and came flying across the room. Head first, spread eagle.

“Rose, no!” I raised my arms up in a vain attempt to protect myself.

She slipped right past my defenses. Rose belly flopped right on top of me. Her arms wrapping around my back as mine did hers. Except she held me in vice like grip and I felt as though my spine might dislocate in three separate pieces. She rubbed her cheeks against mine, left then right, then left again.

And, of course, everyone piled in afterwards. Rose had obliterated the detente and everyone's emotions burst from behind the dam of civility. I wondered what might break first, the bed, or me.

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A week later and I still needed a cane to walk. Rehabilitation had been a slow process, but I couldn't keep myself secluded to that bed forever. Events were beginning to unfold quickly while I'm incapacitated. If I didn't make my move soon, the world would move against me. I hoped this limp would be negligible in another week's time. Susan assured me it would. Given the rate of recovery. What I'd carry with me would be a few new scars. One thin line, diagonal across

my chest, in particular. Where Nerick had almost cleaved me into twain. Rose kept gushing about how masculine it was. And I've just about lost count of all the times she's wanted to hear my fight with the drug addicted wanna be lumberjack. Detail by detail.

How my body is holding up is not what I need concern myself with now, however. A lot of questions were circling inside my head as I hobbled my way through the halls of Sulunaerg. Hyria had requested an audience with me as soon as I was able to move without anyone's help. She wanted to meet with me, and me alone. None of the other girls seemed too keen on the idea, but they didn't feel particularly threatened by the wight princess. Her eyes were looking elsewhere. What we had to discuss is business. Plain and simple. We had agreed upon a contract. I've done my part, so now it was time for her to keep her end of the bargain.

After what felt as if I had gone from one corner of the castle to the other, I arrived at the Princess' chamber. Not her personal chamber, but what is serving as her throne room. She has after all taken over Yaleria and is now reigning as its monarch. No doubt sending the Empire into a tizzy. No doubt that is something she wants to talk about.

I knocked twice on the door and they opened immediately. Two ghastly pulled aside the heavy wooden doors. They were both armed with sinister looking halberds and adorned it what was almost outright plate armor that could pass as swimwear. If it were not for the moderately tasteful tabards they wore over top of it.

“Welcome, Mister Laven,” A gentle voice beckoned me inside.

As I hobbled my way inside, the giant doors swung shut behind me. Behind me I could hear the two skeletal warriors chitter behind my back. I've gotten used to it by now. Ba'el hadn't been wrong when she said I am held in high regard to everything here without a pulse.

“She could have held this meeting in a smaller room,” I grumbled quietly to myself.

This room was massive. A true audience hall, but eerily empty. One soul, myself, two guards behind me and three maidens in front at the other end. I walked along the red carpet painted a kaleidoscope of colors as the stained glass murals filtered the moonlight from outside. It detailed a long history of Yaleria, mostly from the time after it had

been broken into two. Now the Shadelands were no more and Yaleria is one piece again. You'd hear a lot of different opinions on whether that's a good thing, or a sign that the end of the world is nigh. Although much of it were works or art I am not sure how long they'd last before they were reworked into something that isn't propaganda against the undead... And turned into the complete opposite.

At last I made it to the end of the hallway and my feet were killing me. My knees still felt like they were welded half together and my hips... Well, let me say along with my pelvis they haven't had the chance to rest and heal along with the rest of me... Regardless, I tried to bow politely to the best of my ability.

“Please, Laven. Do not strain yourself on my account. This is not a formal audience,” Hyria implored.

And she was as pale as ever. Ivory white skin, platinum blonde hair, pearl irises. To say nothing of her new flowing black dress which popped right out. If only she'd cut it a little higher around the best... And tried to show off less thigh. Too much to ask of a monster to dress more conservatively, I suppose. Even for the monarchs. One thing remained constant, the shining crown jewel hanging from her neck. A brilliant half crescent sapphire.

Beside her were the Princess' left and right hands. Medae, the court magician stood at her right side. A lich with deathly blue skin. We had met a couple times before. She did not speak much and did not like it when I looked at her. Especially when I didn't look her in the eyes. To Hyria's left was Griselda, the Ghulritter. I had seen her before, but not spoken with her. Rose kept trying to pick a fight with her, but she always refused. I'm thankful she's not wearing her helmet, because the eerie glow of her eyes in the shadow it casts over her face gives me the creeps. To say nothing of her steed, which is just outright a moving horse skeleton with empty glowing eye sockets.

“Allow me to express my heartfelt appreciation for everything you have done for Yaleria,” She said with a faint smile on her pale lips.

There wasn't the same kind of joviality in the way she carried herself from before. I had a good inkling as to the cause.

"I think I've caused more harm than good, but I did what I could," I replied.

“No need to be so modest. I know these happy times are but

an accident on your account, but it is your heroics, your scarifies, that there exists a Yaleria at all."

"Half of—"

She raised her hand and begged me to be silent. The rest of the sentence got caught up in the back of my throat at such a simple gesture.

"The man called Vee will be brought to justice. I shall send my agents to punish this Ouroborous for what they intended to do with this land I so love. You need not worry. So too shall they pay for what harm they have done onto you."

It's not any amount of harm I can't walk away from. After having a hole blown through my chest, the wringer Vee put me through didn't seem so bad... But I could not disagree that he had to be found and stopped. He was carrying with him knowledge that could be dangerous to the world.

"So do not let any guilt, nor sin, weigh you down. You have help undo a great evil that has gripped this land for over two thousand years."

"Are you so sure about that?" I could not help but interrupt to ask. "I mean, the Yalerians can't be taking this all lightly."

Waking up to mercenaries commandeering your home, your possessions, the food off your table for a war effort, half your country being blown away and then occupied by an army of the undead. I can't imagine anyone content with that. They are quiet because they no doubt feel captive. Corralled and waiting to have their brains fed to the zombies now milling about.

"Although we have lost Aaron's silver mines, the treasuries lost to the Shadelands can now be emptied. With those funds we can clear the bogs that have choked Yaleria and return it to its former glory. It has already begun naturally with swatches of the Brightwall being destroyed. We've salvaged much of it from the catacombs beneath the ruins of that detestable structure. The people need not fear starvation. All of Duke Malco's work will not be for naught."

Mere mention of Malco had a visible impact on her. She looked away to recompose herself. I could tell by the look on her pained face she wished not to have mentioned him.

“Is his condition any better?” I dared to ask.

“He shall live,” she replied, sorrowfully. “When he shall awaken, if ever, I do not know. And should he, the wolf will ne'er walk again.”

I almost questioned the last bit, but she shut me down rather quickly. As cryptically as ever:

“I have seen it.”

I would not be the one to question her clairvoyance. Not here, not now. That did nothing to assuage the feeling that the sword of Damocles was swinging overhead.

“It is a shame you never had the opportunity to meet. My suspicions is that you would eventually get along, and perhaps be friends. Now I fear that may never come to pass.”

This is far too painful a topic for her to dwell on. I had to move it along, no matter how rude I might come off as.

“...I take it you didn't ask for me so you could tell me everything will be alright,” I said.

“No. I asked for you so that I could offer you my thanks, and payment for your deeds. I shall endeavor to assist you however I am able. You are also welcome to return to my kingdom as a guest of honor from now till the end of time.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as I successfully distracted her from Malco's condition.

“Afraid we can't stay for long. Soon as I can toss this cane away, we'll have to make our way.”

It wont be safe here forever. The Empire is breathing down Yaleria's neck. They are none too pleased to see this place succumb to the undead. Something Yaleria had resisted for about two millennia. News of this event will no doubt cause panic in the Empire... And retribution. Which I earlier learned was the reason for Chris' courier mission had been about. She had flown back to Violetta seeking aid. Aid which had been promptly promised. In no small part after hearing I had been responsible for it. Piece by piece the North has been slipping from the grasp of the Empire. Domdracveria being at the center of it. Now another chunk of it has slipped free, one a little too close to home.

These past forty year cease fire could break at any time. We need to be squared away in the Free Ports before that happens .

We could claim sanctuary with the guild and at the very least we'd be safe for a while. Then we can decide where to go when the chance presents itself. I'm positive now that the answers I seek are across the southern sea. Beyond the Southern coast where the Free Ports are.

Hyria snapped her fingers and from the shadows came a small troop of cloaked ghouls. They were pallbearers of some trinket. Wrapped in cloth. They held it out for me to take from them, I was hesitant to say the least.

“We cannot begin to pay you back for all you have done,” Griselda spoke, in a girlish voice that did not suit her imposing form at all. “But we offer you this gift as a token of our appreciation.”

I accepted the gift and the ghouls slinked away, giggling in delight, I think. With care I unwrapped the shawl and discovered it is a pair of metal plates. Curved and form fitting. It looked oddly familiar.

“Discovered from the ruins.” Medae spoke. “Warped and ruined, but not beyond repair. A curious alloy indeed. Dwarven made and enchanted by elven magic. Both aspects lost, but our smiths were able to restore it. I enchanted it once more with the light of Babel itself.”

“Might I add how generous of you it was to do so, Medae.” Hyria said, slightly prodding the lich. “She wished to have brought it to you yourself, but she was ever so embarrassed.”

The lich's face turned a shade of purple and she turned aside to hide it.

“You should take care of yourself more, Mister Laven. There are those who care for your deeply. Spare them tears. Looking at their faces as you slept was painful to watch.”

“I—” let out a sigh. “Given everything I've been through, that's a promise I'm not sure I can keep.”

“For once I cannot say whether you will or not. One last gift I need bestow upon you. Know that you are a free man. For better or worse. When I first sensed you near, the future I knew, and feared, was scattered to the four winds. Fate has no hold on you. I know not

why, but you'll cause discord no matter where you go. How the dust is to settle is not for you to decide, but know the storm will follow you. No matter where you intend to go."

Hyria and I stared at one another for what felt like a whole minute. No doubt it was nothing more than a couple seconds. We both understood that were is nothing more to say. Should we meet in the halls we could exchange pleasantries, but our business together has concluded. I bowed politely again to excuse myself and began to hobble away.

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The three undead maidens watched as the man attempted to carry himself away with dignity. A sad sight to see, but thankfully one which is to be short lived. The man had plenty of life left and would no doubt recover. Carrying nothing more than new scars and not injuries. As he neared the end of the hall, Medae's eyes turned toward a peculiar absence. The crescent shaped sapphire adorning the Princess' neck had vanished. A gem of considerable power that had augmented her powers of prophecy.

"Your majesty," the lich begged the princess to the attention of her missing jewel.

Yet Hyria already knew. She waved her hand to quiet the uncharacteristically flustered wizard.

"It was never mine to keep forever. It has its own desire and it wishes to be whole."

Griselda moved her hand to the hilt of her sheathed sword and prepared to give chase, but Hyria reached over with her other hand and held the sword where it was.

"You were watching him the whole time. Not only was he too far away to do so, he is not conscious of it."

The knight relaxed and stood down once more. All three watched as the man limped beyond the oaken doors. A faint pale blue light shining from his pocket. A light which dulled and went dormant the moment before the doors closed behind him.

Chapter 106.5

A golden pearl amongst emerald fields Perrsolis, the capital of the Empire, glistened under the light of heaven. It is an ancient site known as the Phoenix City due in part to its survival throughout the ages. Stone monoliths once erected to ancient gods were splayed like bones bleached under the sun. Time washed away the new and left the old ruins to be the foundation for the next. It waited like black soil underneath the snow for the spring. New and old were arranged as if rings in a tree that gave a bird's-eye view to the succession of cultures and civilizations that made the Celreulian Plains their home. At the city's center lay its heart, seven hills that loomed over the prairie.

Nowhere else in the whole world—and its many continents—did such a metropolis exist. A staggering two million souls resided within its administrative border. An area covering shy of five-hundred kilometers squared. Beyond that lay the fertile black-soil fields of Celreulian. Yet not even that could sustain the city. What allowed this city to reach such staggering heights was the Imperial Rail System. Perrsolis is its central hub and all corners of the Empire were connected here. Trade across the continent passed though the city, making it the beating heart of The Empire.

Ancient monoliths were its soul, the world wonder of its alchemical train system its heart, but it's mind lurked high above the city in its towers upon its seven hills. On one was the palace of the Emperor, on another the seat of government convened. Beside it the headquarters of the Imperial legion garrisoned and yet another had been carved out and was the grand station of the rail system itself. Two great spires rose out of another two, one a grand library and the other a treasury, a mystery to all but few scholars who guarded its many secrets unto death. And one of the seven being home to a colossally sized cathedral. Built upon a foundation replete with ancient marble columns betrayed its origin as a pagan temple a thousand years ago. Now it stood in grace with great spires, flying buttresses, domed arches, statues dedicated to saints of old and endless stained glass murals. It is Aionus Liolus, Church of the Eternal Sun, dedicated in honor to the greatness of the Almighty.

Far removed from the narthex and the church itself where the worshipers gather all day and all night to pray, and far above the altar where the clergy performs their rights, were the chambers of the Church's highest echelons. Among them were guest rooms that also housed dignitaries from across the globe, but the largest and most heavily guarded was the officials chamber he who presides over the

capital itself. Grand Cardinal Ol'een sits behind his oaken desk taking stock of the Church's affairs.

He is a man of middle age with brown hair that is beginning to show streaks of gray. His psyche is solid, with a slight portly gut, but otherwise stout and physically prime. A pair of green eyes sparkled with energetic youth and glistened with his ivory white smile. Pulled around his round head is light leathery hide that is his skin with a flat nose. A face with ruggedly masculine features weathered and calloused from decades of stress and strain. Yet the Buddha-like smile seldom vanished from his visage. Despite the loftiness of his position, the man wore humble brown robes with a simple rope tied around his waist and crude sandals. Nothing more than an ornate bronze and tarnished silver necklace depicting the Star of the Almighty, the church's primary iconography.

Another man appeared in the room, yet resided far away. He appeared in an illusion, a projection half the world away. The Church used a system known as the Testament to facilitate communications across the world in real time. A relic unearthed from ancient times with pieces of it occasionally recovered, repaired and employed by the Church which coveted it. They are strategically placed across the globe in the hands of the cardinals, each one given charge over the faith in a general region. The man Ol'een spoke to now presided over an Archipelago far to the southwest. His phantom image floated above the floor, translucent, golden in hue, appearing in the middle of several spotlight beams of light from a strange machine that hung from the ceiling above like a chandelier.

He was cardinal Brutunda, a man as wide as he is tall. Heavy set with a great girth. He is bald save two patches of short grey hair growing out from the sides of his skull. His skin is ebony with black eyes and wide nose. Like Ol'een, his smile if pearl white and his temperament jolly, the fat off his skin undulates with each hearty laugh. Unlike the Grand Cardinal, however, Brutunda wore all the fineries of cardinal with no hesitation. A red silk cap to match his red robes embroidered with gold thread. Silver rings with precious gemstones and religious symbols of the Almighty adorned his body as he wore it all in an attempt to match the glorious radiance of the sun itself.

“—And with the arrests a fortnight earlier, the unrest on Tuwali island has been brought to heel,” Brutunda said with his deep baritone voice.

“It is good to hear fortuitous tidings from the Southern Isles

for once, Cardinal Brutunda. I am pleased I did not err in elevating you to your position," Ol'een lauded.

Brutunda's lips curled into a cautious smile. He could not gauge the intentions of Ol'een's from the look on his face, but by the tone in his voice. Meanwhile, Ol'een watched the other man's face closely for each individual tic. Brutunda saw not a man speak before him, but a phantasmal black monolith. It loomed over him the rune of 'One, Holy Be Thy Name' written upon it in gold.

"They were not only heretics who spit upon the grace of God, but to their benefactors as well," Brutunda said, condemning the rebels.

"The Empire's bureaucrats concern themselves with nothing more than the tonnage of sugar and spice which leaves the Adwari Islaes, but we both know better, dear cardinal. The concerns of merchants lie with how safe the passage is through the islands favorable trade winds. Colonies further to the south and southwest are imperiled with unrest throughout Adwari.

"The King is but a young boy, hot-headed and temperamental. With age he will realize the weight of his charge, I am sure of it."

"I would not question your ability to judge character, Cardinal Brutunda. That among many other reasons is why I petitioned for your placement on the Holy See... Know that you are his spiritual guide and it is your responsibility to ensure he, and the rest of your people, remain true to our Lord's divine teachings."

Brutunda bowed deeply in response. But while his head was bowed, the Grand Cardinal continued to speak.

"You are to instruct his highness and see to it that he does not permit piracy and the slave trade to revive itself—again... Man is made in the image of God, is it not to spit in his face by putting him in chains? To treat him as property?"

Brutunda quickly raised his head and was quick to rebut, "Long ago our people were all slaves. Only by misfortune of plague did our former masters perish and we were free... Yet slavery is all they knew—"

"And when the last Demon Lord washed across your homeland like a hurricane, it was within The Empire your people found

refuge. By the grace of God the Adwarians persisted while many others perished. Not by the guidance of idols and petty spirits, but by the grace of God. Now the Empire expends great treasure to revive your kingdom. See to it your people not spite his Majesty the Emperor with a fall back into barbarism. We are not to endure merchants who suffer piracy and kidnap... To say nothing of their penchant of nondiscrimination when it comes to monsterkine. You know as much as I do that monsters cannot exist in chains. They choose to wear them as a snake chooses to coil itself... It does it not to cower, but to later strike with great speed. To goad the egos of men, who themselves will be corrupted soon after."

"Your faith in me will not prove to be misplaced, your holiness," Brutunda said becoming a little nervous.

"I know it wont. It was not by my hand that your predecessor stood where you are now. A man with... divided loyalties."

Ol'een's smile melted off his face. Brutunda could not see it happen, but he could feel it. His tone of voice became a bit frantic as a result.

"For conspiring with witch doctors... And laying with them, his name shall not soon be forgotten, but never sung in praise. Reviled for all time."

"Women who gave themselves over to spirits. Daemons.... Monsters like any other, Cardinal Brutunda. I know you understand this. I know you will not find an end like that of Cardinal Nulon, a man of divided loyalties. So too did he end, divided. His right half hanging above the western gate of Illreeven Port, the left above the east."

Brutunda's eyes widened with terror and his body shook. He had been a mere priest during the time of the previous Cardinal which ended five years ago. Although he suspected many Church activities in Adwari at that time, the priest was powerless to do anything about it. He had been there when Nulon's corpse was found. Early in the morning, before the sunrise. His body had been cleaved cleanly in two. Deliberately, by someone, something, cruel and calculating with a sick sense of humor to end him so ironically. Yet the corpses had been taken down before the public knew. The official story had been a heart attack. There was a closed casket funeral. Only the innermost members of the Church at that time knew the truth. And fewer still knew to this day because many of those men did not survive the following purge when the Inquisition arrived from the mainland.

Brutunda's sharp mind quickly come to one of two conclusions: Ol'een's information network went deeper than he had previously suspected, which meant EVERYTHING he did would not escape notice... Or Ol'een heard of what happened from the only other person who could have ever known... The one who did it. Rumors of the Arch Assassins frittered about his mind and filled him with dread.

“Keep the peace and I will not have to advice the Imperial Court to increase the garrison throughout Adwari.” Ol'een continued. “If you have no other business, I have but one last order... Now that the situation in the Isles is beginning to cool, I request your attendance at the capital.”

Brutunda wiped the sweat from his brow and his voice quaked, “You aren't thinking of—”

“Convening the Holy See?” Ol'een interrupted, finishing the other man's sentence. “That is correct. There have been many successes in the South, but troubles brew in the north. A new strategy must be implemented... Leave with your delegation as soon as possible and make your way to Perrsolis before the next new moon... That will be all, Cardinal Brutunda.”

Brutunda drew a star across his chest with a finger, bowed and then faded away. The light within Ol'een's room returned to normal, going from dim to flooded from its natural source from the window behind him. Coming back into light was another figure who had been watching silently. Inquisitor Zerin, the scarred blood hound. A young man in white robes, black shaggy hair. His eyes were naturally pursed eyes shut, but more so now as he reflected on everything he had seen.

“Your thoughts,” Ol'een asked, not deigning to turn toward the shadow on the wall.

“He is honest. Earnest,” Zerin concluded. “If he fails it will not be because of sin or vice, but because the weight of the office was too much for him to bear.”

“My thoughts exactly. And if he does fail he will learn. Honest souls are in short supply, as you would know.”

Zerin pried himself away from the wall and circled around in front of Ol'een's desk to confront him directly. The Grand Cardinal was still unmoved and unconcerned. He retained that same gentle smile which had returned not too long ago. Zerin could still never make

heads or tails from it. He prided himself on the ability to read people, but he could never tell if Ol'een is a gentle man capable of sudden violence, or the smile was mask he expertly wore to hide his real emotions.

“So you truly intend to convene the Holy See?” Zerin asked.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures, Inquisitor Zerin.”

“It has been... Three centuries,” Zerin said, after having to stop and think when it had last happened.

“And it was a failure. As were the other two over the last thousand years.”

“No one wishes to elect the next Patriarch. Not after the sacrifice of the last Matriarch. To do so would be an admission to the world we are living in end times.”

“It matters not what the people of the world think, Zerin. It matters only what God decrees. No decision has been made before, because He did not grant divine inspiration to those assembled. Thus all parties assembled disbanded with no decision and went back to their affairs... But this cannot continue. Not with the path we are on now.

Ol'een's smile turned into a frown and that alone was enough to have Zerin's hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end.

“Are you afraid our Lord, The Almighty, will not speak to us?” He asked of the inquisitor.

“N-not at all, your holiness!”

Ol'een's expression is the very definition of skepticism. Zerin began to wilt under the pressure, yet the Grand Cardinal did not appear to be judging the Inquisitor for his doubts—and his fears.

Their conversation is cut short as the doors leading into the Grand Cardinal's official chambers are thrown open with a bang. Before the doors could rebound off the walls and slam back shut a man strode forward with an air of unparalleled arrogance. Zerin jumped to attention while Ol'een sat completely unsurprised.

With medium length blonde hair whipping about dramatically

with each step he took was a knight with winged helmet tucked beneath his arm. His features were handsome, albeit androgynously so. A pair of blue eyes shone above his

aquiline nose. He appeared more like a pretty poster-boy than a rugged, gallant and masculine cavalier. A knight's tench-coat threaded with white, noble blue and vibrant red billowed off him as he gracefully closed in one the Grand Cardinal's desk. He did not make it there though, the Inquisitor quickly stepped forward and into his path. Nothing short of that would have stopped the man.

The knight gave a polite bow toward Zerin, “Sir Abdren, at your service... Mister?”

Zerin did not introduce himself in kind, “You are not a member of the clergy. Who permitted you to make it so far into this sanctuary unannounced?”

“Zerin...” Ol'een mumbled, but too quiet for the man to hear him.

Zerin did not back down and with lightning speed he seized Abdren by the scruff of his collar. Abdren's eyes widened with the speed at which his arm moved. The sleeves of Zerin's arm rolled up as a consequence and showed the litany of hideous scars covering it. Yet Abdren quickly regained his smile and composure. He acted as if the Blood Hound posed no threat to him whatsoever.

“What of the guards?... Well!?”

“I, Sir Abdren, Paladin Captain, employed in the service of her Holiness Grand Cardinal Ulmpher.”

Rather than have Zerin back down, mention of the woman only caused him to tighten his grip. Everything he knew about Ulmpher went against every belief central to his core. A moderate who wished to establish a truce between human and monsterkind. A coward who would do what it takes to avoid another war at any cost, even if it meant making a deal with the devil. One who cared more about earthly matter than the ever-after, the eternal and the will of God. Ulmpher and Ol'een were bitter enemies. His intrusion here, unannounced, was to Zerin nothing less than an incursion. An invasion.

“Zerin, that is enough.” Ol'een said to reel in his attack dog, but he did not put enough spirit into his command and it did not reach his addled ears.

Instead, the inquisitor tightened his grip harder than before. His mutilated hand which had lost most of its ability to feel. Due to it being cut off and then melted back onto his arm, so that it would not be lost to him. It killed pain receptors, but did not harm its ability to receive instructions from his mind. It now moved with speeds and had strength that would have other men collapse onto the floor in pain.

Abdren did not appear to mind at all. Even as the man, tall as he was, got pulled off his feet. Now his knees slackened and held up by Zerin's unnatural arm strength alone. The paladin's body went limp and did not resist. Rather, a curious smile spread across his face which infuriated the inquisitor even more.

This continued until a curious snap could be heard. Zerin had Abdren by the cloth of his coat, but his grip caused something to snap and give way. It caused a pressure to push outward from the paladin's chest and Zerin's eyes furrowed in confusion. Something is no right, thought Zerin. As he glared down at Abdren, the look on his face, the very contours of his face seemed wrong.

“What's the matter, Zerin?” Abdren asked with a wry grin. “Ha ha, looks like you are going a bit pale there. Like you've seen a ghost.”

Zerin watched in horror as a series of lines etched themselves into Abdren's face. Scars, to be precise. When they finished, they looked like a mirror image of Zerin's own. Complete with one blue eye, now white, as if it went blind before his very own.

“A man your age ought not to be scared of ghosts,” whatever it was Zerin had grabbed hold of said. “Ghosts can't hurt you... But, how does the saying go?..”

Before his one good eye, Zerin watched Abdren's blonde hair turn pitch black, the facial features rearrange to resemble his own, but softer and rounded. As if he were looking at a female version of himself looking back up at him with a devilish smile.

“Meeting your doppelgänger is an omen of your untimely demise.”

Zerin released the figure from his grip and stumbled backward until he backed up right into Ol'een's desk and almost tumbled backwards over it. The woman in front of him giggled with delight at the comical sight. Now he could see the snap earlier had been a chest binding coming undone as a pair of modest breasts now also adorned

the creature which looked just like a female version of himself. She did not retain that figure long before materializing a parasol from thin air through some trick with sleight-of-hand. She unfurled it, held it in front of herself to hide herself, twirled around and when she came back around and moved it back over her shoulder a whole other being was standing there before him.

Hair blue like the sea, curled into drills ganging from the side of her head to her shoulders. Her face had no distinguishing features and existed as a well crafted doll rather than a person's would since it also had no flaws. Her manner of dress was frilly over nauseatingly girly. A Baroque style exaggerated to its extreme, down to her ankles with block heeled shoes. Curiously open to her cleavage and her abdomen however. The parasol she let rest on her shoulder and spun it playfully round and round.

“Blue, the Betrayer,” Ol'een spoke clearly at last.

“An honor, as always, your holiness,” Blue said with a proper curtsy.

Zerin, out of his league, slinks away and behind Ol'een's desk. He does so in the hopes that the Grand Cardinal decides to ignore how he got so out of line. Ol'een appears to be more concerned with that the Assassin has to report than Zerin's follies.

“My schedule is busy as of late, so be out with it,” Ol'een commands, the usual smile on his face no longer present.

“I bring both good tidings... And ill,” Blue says with a smile all the while. I do declare though, the good outweighs the bad. You need not concern yourself with Ulmpher any longer. She will be a non-entity for quite some time.”

Ol'een's eyebrow perks up. Blue blushes, frets and continues on.

“Oh, I didn't have to do such a thing. Someone else did it for me. I merely had to let them get away with it. For you see, it's all thanks to Greenie. Oh, how I cried the night I remember being told she is no longer of this world. But there she was, in the flesh!”

Zerin shook as he stood idly by at the wall. He knew exactly what the lolitia dressed girl was talking about: Green, the Reaper. He knew better than anyone that she is certainly not dead. The Green Reaper is the one responsible for the insufferable pain he feels in his

arm every day and every night.

“Blue. Focus,” Ol'een demanded.

She was quick to comply eager too, “As you ordered me too, I shadowed Grand Cardinal Ulmpher. First I found some vice ridden noble on the other side of the continent. He was easy to seduce. Too easy. Then after I killed him and took his place I applied his family's reputation for admission into the Templar ranks. Promoted to Paladin in short order thanks to those connections too. What joke those Templar have become. You ought to do something about it. Anyways, I managed to get a place in her retinue. Worked myself up to Lieutenant and waited for the right moment to strike.”

She held her hands up to her cheeks and waved back and forth in ecstasy as she recalled the events.

“Decades of her life dedicated to hunting down demons. She's on the tail of the biggest one yet. She got close, so close, but its torn right out from under her. Right in front of her. Ohh~ I can still feel the tingling even now. The look on her face as I ordered her men to stand down and let them get away.”

“Who did you let loose upon the world?”

“Why, Greenie of course... Oh and some guy named Laven and a motley group of monsters too,” she said with a shrug.

Zerin fumed in the corner but said nothing. Ol'een remained unmoved.

“That's the bad news,” Blue said very nonchalantly. “You got a baphomet on the loose. Weakened, but still—”

“—What of Ulmpher?” Ol'een interrupted, uninterested in the daemon.

“They took her hostage while they sent her men away. I thought they'd kill her, but I guess the guy had second thoughts. That look on his face when he figured out Ulmpher had been using kids as bait, oh ho ho ho, exquisite... Anyway, she's alive, but shaken. Two near death experiences back to back. Decades of work ending in failure, she's a mess at the moment. Wont even leave her room. Hardly eats and wont talk to no one... Is it guilt? Is it despair over failure? Didn't stick around to find out. Knew my time was up and had to disappear.”

Ol'een tented his fingers in front of him and reclined backward in his chair. He closed his eyes and took a series of very deep breaths. He finished absorbing everything and smiled again. The sight of it had Blue's knees quivering and rubbing against one another.

“If-if there's anything else I could do for you know, your holiness... I—”

“Dorothy Henwrite,” Ol'een said.

Blue's blushed face went pale white. She froze solid on the spot. Eyed wide with fright.

“You are dismissed.”

All the eagerness she had vanished in an instant. He had called her by a dead name. Her human name. That enough was sufficient to bring a flood of memories. She awkwardly curtsied and robotically walked herself out of the room.

After she had vanished behind the doors, Zerin stepped forward, “One of your—”

“That goes for you too, Zerin. Leave. Now.”

Not since Ol'een had nearly killed him had Zerin heard that tone in his voice. Enough to scatter his wits and send him into an abject panic. Not wanting to risk the man's wrath, the inquisitor hurried himself out of the room. For the first time in a long time, the Grand Cardinal enjoyed the feeling of solitude. Or so the casual observer would conclude. Ol'een pushed out his chair, stood up and walked over to the curtains leading toward the balcony behind him. He subtly pushed it aside ever so little with a one finger and let a beam of natural light into the room. His eyes looked out over the city as he pondered. It did not appear as if he was looking for something, or anything in particular. That's because he quickly learned he had been outmaneuvered.

A sensation in the back of his skull told himself something was laying in wait behind him. It was nothing he needed to fear, but its playing games with him annoyed him. It was a mere demonstration that it could have killed him had it wanted to, but chose not to. When he stepped away from the curtain and turned to face it, the presence smiled back at him.

“Good afternoon, Lucien,” a woman's voice greeted him.

She sat, legs crossed at the knee on the desk before him. Her slightly upturned eyes glowed a shade of magenta as she the loitered in the shadow Ol'een cast before him. Her head was adorned with a yellowish-orange tint, cascading down to her lower back. Two boho braids above her hairline which met at the back in a bun. Above her pump lipped grin is a dainty nose. But that grin, replete with fangs, quickly betrayed this was no ordinary woman.

A pair of animalistic ears crowned her head, feline in nature, but rounded than a cat's. A lion's ear. Wrapped around her neck like a scarf, but as if emerging from her collar bone, a mane of ivory white fur. It stood out amongst the peachy white skin, of which she showed much of. Seemingly unperturbed to be wearing nothing more than what could be considered underwear. A little red dress number which was cut too low to be modest enough to restrain her sizable bust, nor cover her hips enough to hide the lowcut thong.

Her monstrous nature was on fully display on the rest of her body. A chimeric being that is an unholy combination of other abominable creatures. From the elbows and knees, crowned with fluffy white fur, down her arms where covered in soft fur—same color as her hair. These limbs ended in dexterous hand-like paws, claws retracted, but ready at a moment's notice. Yet she was no mere beastman. From her shoulder blades sprouted two bat-like wings. Their impressive wingspan making her capable of flight. The worst of all though, the tail which grew out from the end of her spine. Scorpion in nature, segmented, ending in what appeared like a flanged mace complete with barbs coated with poison. Yet it also has its own separate maw, opening ever so slightly as if it were a whole other living being. The insides lined with fleshy walls, a sexual organ safely stowed away inside a weapon.

A much feared creature originating from the mid-east. A man-eater. The manticore.

“Red, the Mist,” Ol'een greeted the woman.

“Lucien, please. Call my Misty,” She giggled and smiled.

Nothing about the personality behind that laughter made it infectious. Especially since the woman refused to offer the Grand Cardinal the most basic of respect for his office. Calling him by a name no one else would. Not for many, many, years.

They stared at one another for quite some time without one flexing a single muscle. The one thing that moved was her tail which swished back and forth as if it did indeed have a mind of its own. More like it acted on the manticore's subconscious thoughts without a care for anything else. It pointed itself toward Ol'een, sometimes opening and closing, going as far as it could toward him. It longed for him, but was painfully out of reach.

“Are you here merely to waste my time?” Ol'een sighed, exasperated.

“No time we are together is wasted,” she said seductively, all while slowly and deliberately uncrossing and recrossing her legs in reverse.

Her intentions were clear, and so Ol'een took steps very few men would be brave enough to take. It sat back down in his chair as the Manticore rolled over on top of his desk. She laid down upon it as if a piano and she were the singer, the star attraction. The tail would get close, so very close, to coming into contact with Ol'een, but always pulled away at the last second.

“How much did you hear?” Ol'een asked.

“Enough to know Minte is still with us. Oh, how could you be so mean? She was always my favorite, you know that.”

“And that's all?”

“I don't care about the rest. Couldn't care less... But with another man now? I suppose you were never as popular as you've thought you are... She never ever showed emotion, so who's to know? But that settles that, now doesn't it? She was Ciel's only real success after all.”

That disrespect, that minor sleight was enough for Ol'een to reach out and grab Red by the mane and pull her close so that he could glare at her right in the eye. She did not react, at all. She met his furious expression with one more sultry than before. He grabbed her, and now her tail's maw tussled the hair atop his head playfully. Sexual juices from within making it damper than before.

Nothing about her face made Ol'een think she was about to apologize about insulting his long departed mentor. He let her go once he regained his senses. The tail pulled away as well and she rolled over again. Now she lay on her stomach, propped up by her elbows,

breasts smushed against the desk top. She kicked her paws behind her playfully while giggling at Ol'een.

“Oh ho, don't be that way. I have some truly delicious news for you instead.”

Ol'een restrained himself and did not let a single muscle in his face twitch. Nothing that could excite or make the manticore feel any sort of fulfillment from her games.

“So? How about it? How much is it worth to you?.. I know. How about a little kiss?”

Ol'een could not remain calm with that one and his eye narrowed in a furious expression of utter indignation. That elicited a brimming smile from her. His reaction had been exactly what she was looking for. She laughed mirthfully and rolled to and fro atop the desk while doing so. Ol'een patience in the meantime was reaching its limit.

“Oh, where have I been these last few months? Let's start with that as a hint. Okay?”

“You have not gone anywhere,” Ol'een replied.

“Oh ho,” Red replied with her eyes going wide with surprise. “You could tell? Was it the lack of heartache? Distance makes the heart grow fonder... Or maybe you could still smell my scent? You are coming on in years, so it's impressive you still have all your youthful senses...” She licks her lips as she finishes that thought, “But men age like fine wine either way.”

Seeing her latest provocation not get any results she sighs and decides to let up for now.

“I've had the Imperial Palace on stake out for some time now. And you wont ever imagine what it is I've heard. Something the Empress doesn't want anyone else to know.”

Several possibilities of what Red had said ran through Ol'een's mind, but none of them prepared for what was to come out form between her lips.

“The Emperor is dead, has been for the last three months.”

The implications of what Red had said hit Ol'een like a sledgehammer to the chest.

“Say that again,” Ol'een commanded.

“The Empress has been the one calling the shots in her dead husband's name for over half a year now. Three months ago the old man finally croaked. She's hiding it from everyone. Even from her own children. Wont let anyone visit his highness's chamber. Her and her personal servants. No one else.”

Ol'een caught himself leaning forward in his chair to listen closely. He then reclined backward and his body went limp. The chaos which would result in that information going public, the situation of the Empire as it is, would be catastrophic.

“It appears the Empress too understands the gravity of the situation... But to think she'd dare to hide this from the ministers, the nobles... and even the Church... To deny the Emperor his proper burial rites...”

“Quite the juicy morsel to know before anyone else, no?” Red sneered with delight.

Ol'een did not respond. He has already gone deep into thought.

“Does it not warrant a reward?” She purred, as her paw reached down to a string holding her underwear to her hip. “I've always got a spot reserved, just for you. Only for you—”

Her ears perked up and she stopped seduction and craned her head toward the door. Someone was coming. She hissed and by the time Ol'een snapped out of it she had vanished as if into thin air. A fluttering of the curtain behind him is the sole trace of her departure. Soon after there came a knocking at the door. No doubt more news about trouble elsewhere within the Empire and abroad.

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Perched far away, but in sight of Ol'een's window, Red—Misty—the manticore watched and stalked the Grand Cardinal. Her meeting had been painfully short after not being in the same room together for months... At least when one of them was still awake. Her vision is as keen as any bird of prey, so even from more than a kilometer away she could watch as he worked. She watched as he kept that placid and kind smile on his face. The one she knew better than to believe in, ever. Before there was such a thing as the Arch Assassins, she had been there. Unlike all the others, she had some special quality. She's a

monster, through and through. Red is not the result of some tragic story. A damned soul in search of redemption. No part of her had ever been human. Only in form did she resemble one. In spirit she longed for Ol'een like a pining lovestruck woman. But then again, that love itself was twisted. Demented.

Her face was flushed as she indulged in her voyeurism. Her tail, however, with a whip crack let loose a barrage of poison tipped barbs toward a nearby wall. She head the bones which were as sharp and hard as steel collide with nothing but stone and the sound brought a frown to her face.

Red pried her eyes off Ol'een and turned it to the side to see someone had managed to get much closer undetected than she was comfortable with. Neither did her scatter shot of barbs hit their target. They embedded into a nearby wall. Had they been on target, three were bound for the torso, one for each limb and one in the forehead. Now they made a crude outline of a person instead.

Red hissed. She knew whoever it was they moved only as much as they needed to. A mocking gesture which took her lightly. Now she's forced to see who it is. She confirmed her suspicions once laying eyes on the very embodiment of a maid. With perfect posture, but poised to instantaneous action. With a long dress and apron fluttering in the wind.

Not just any maid, however. She clearly distinguished it as something inhuman, although she could certainly pass as one with little effort. She had short hair, down to her chin, dirty and gray in coloration. A pair of dog ears flopped down like oversized sideburns, but they clearly twitched in response to sudden noises. She had feathers growing from her wrists and what appeared to be a tail which was also curiously feathery in nature. While her hands were human in both shape and function, her feet were clearly avian, yet morphed into a shape that appeared like a pair of high heeled boots. Red had to be a little envious, this creature could easily pass off as human if she chooses too. Which would be why she likely didn't notice anything out-of-place like this as she watched the Palace these last few months.

Red sniffed the air a couple times and then issued her threats, “And if I pick up that scent of yours again it wont be a warning shot next time.”

“The first wasn't a warning shot at all,” the maid responded, calmly, yet biting.

Her aquamarine irises locked-on to Red with killing intent. Strong enough that even the Manticore, for all her bloodlust, was capable of feeling.

Red stood up from her perch and turned to face the maid proper this time. She held in paws out and shrugged.

“So how does a flightless bird like you get so high?”

“If you intend to do the Imperial Family harm, you will not live long to regret it,” the maid replied, straight to the point.

Red's eyebrow raised at the threat, “Do you know not who I am?”

“I know perfectly well who you are. That is why I am warning you now. Should you lay your hand on her highness, or any of her household, you will be disposed of.”

“Wait, we're getting ahead of ourselves here. THE Imperial family? A monster like you? In the Imperial Palace?”

“We are the spirits that have guarded her highness family for countless generations. Now that family includes the Imperial Dynasty as well. Should you seek to do them harm, you will not be shown mercy.”

“Oh, spirits... Household spirits. Kikimora, right?”

She declined to reply.

“So you think you are better than us monsters, huh? Is that it?”

The maid did not respond. She was waiting for a particular response to her threats. Eventually Red caught on and sighed.

“You serve your masters, and I serve mine.”

“The Grand Cardinal,” the maid said.

“No,” Red rebutted. “Myself, who loves the Grand Cardinal.”

For the first time the maid showed emotion: Confusion.

“If he doesn't want your precious family harmed, then I don't

care what you do. I don't care if you even exist. I spied on you because I know he was curious about what you were up to. And what a mess your masters have gotten themselves into," she finished with a vicious smile. "Does it bother you that much that I now know your little secret? You don't trust that information with my dear Lucien?"

The maid did not reply. She knew it is not her right to do so on behalf of the family at this place in time and to whom she was speaking to.

"Her highness' idea, right? Am I right? I know she was young when she and the Emperor shacked up, but to think some of his shrewdness rubbed off on her. Maybe things will get interesting after all."

"If you have no intention of harming the Imperial family, then let our business here by finished," the maid said whilst pulling up the hem of her dress to curtsey.

"Don't give my Lucien a reason to, and you'll have nothing to worry about. Besides, with how things are gonna go down once your little secret gets out... I'm gonna be too busy elsewhere to worry myself about tearing apart your precious little princess and all her brats."

The maid didn't take those insults lightly at all. Mid curtsey she blurred out of sight and was nowhere to be seen. Nothing appeared to be amiss until Red looked down and spied a long steel needle sticking out from the stone between her paws. It hadn't been there until a moment ago. The display of prowess had her grinning. She too took flight as she bided her time until her next target had been assigned to her. One of which would be someone dear to her. Someone she had goaded for years to ilicit a reaction from. Someone who had lived as a dead woman for decades. Now someone with a heart. A heart which could break.

Epilogue: Address of the Beast

Sulunaerg has become a much livelier place over these past couple of weeks. I watched as the grit of steel is replaced with regal decadence. Cold stone floors were covered by red silk carpets. Armories were replaced by cabinets filled fine china. Various pieces of art now lined the hallways and glass panes were being fitted into the windows and arrow slits. The intention of Hyria is as clear as crystal. She intended this place to be one of war no longer. It has transformed into a palace, a far cry from the castle it was before.

Then again, perhaps livelier may be an inappropriate turn of phrase. Not that it made the place feel any less warm than it did before. A hard feat to accomplish, since there hasn't been a sunrise ever since I woke up. That illusion was still in full effect. Perpetual darkness. Forever. Something that looked like the sun would move across the sky in what should be daytime, but it never shone brighter than a full moon would. Following that would be the red and blue moons at night. At all times the stars were visible.

Despite their dead, pallid and cold bodies they moved with earnest. The number of the undead increased, and will soon out populate the living. Without fail every new body was in the form of a woman and each of them with chipper smiles plastered on their faces. Every day fresh pretty faces stalked the halls... Okay, maybe fresh isn't the best word to use.

The zombies appeared dull and dumb. They stumbled about with their strange gaits, but performed their monotonous tasks diligently. You eventually got used to the sight of body parts falling off and having to be sewed back on. It gave the girls a patchwork appearance. I've been assured as they settle in that will become less common. Besides them, and the half skeletons marching about, were ghouls, ghosts and phantoms. They filled every role from maid to soldier. To think that Sulunaerg means 'Death's End' in some ancient forgotten tongue, the irony was not lost on anyone.

I've seen a lot of it over the past few days. Nearly a week has passed since I last met with Hyria. I didn't need crutches to move about anymore, thankfully. Yet I couldn't go for too long before the pain set in. I had to grin and bear through it because I had gone well over the safety limit of healing magics. Too much of any medicine is a poison. So too with magic. Apparently you can overdose on it. Too much magic can be toxic for the body, like an opioid can be. So part of my rehab has required me to get out of my bed, walk it off and fight

atrophy.

Every day I could go a little further before the pain set in. Rose kept telling me that pain is weakness—brought on by injury—leaving my body. 'Another two laps today is as good as four tomorrow,' she'd say while pushing me forward. Susan response to hearing about that was to schedule some time I'd have to myself for these walks. A compelling solution in theory, yet it agitated detente in practice. Each girl wanted every second with me they could get their claws on. I couldn't complain. Having some time to myself in order to think.

Rose had a very spartan approach to me getting better. But when she wasn't trying to work me to the bone, she kept begging me to tell her how my fight went with Nerick. That, or she kept telling what she got up to in the meantime. Then she'd trail off into telling some other story. Then another. Over and over again. Susan, while having good intentions, was on the opposite spectrum. She had a tendency to become suffocating with her prescriptions. A healing regimen which is beyond strict. Measured to the nearest hundredth of a margin of error in its application. She fretted as she took on too much stress. Susan had to do everything herself. It made being around her like walking on eggshells. If I were near, and not in perfect health, she took it too hard. A personal failure that. She needed to relax as much as I did.

Minte's presence was silent, but heavy. I couldn't quite relax when my most primal instincts keep being triggered. She prowled with no ill intent, but her stalking was like that of a blood-thirsty predator. Every time she hid narely within my peripheral vision. My heart rate increased and every time I looked she'd be gone just as fast; as if she wasn't there at all. Minte would have already moved somewhere else, near or far, to continue her watch. Why she couldn't sit in the chair where I could see her was beyond me.

And Chris, well, Chris is Chris. She started writing out a ballad of our exploits by my bedside. Preening me for every detail and picking my brain like a thesaurus to make it all rhyme and be in perfect pentameter. Her singing voice is like an angel, but her handle on the lyrics... I cringe with embarrassment just thinking about it. That's to say nothing of the poem she brought back with her. The thing that gave her the idea in the first place... Straight from Violetta herself. Addressed to me and was so sappy and overbearing. No. I don't want to think about it right now. One hour passed and I wanted to throw myself out the window. And there's another five hours of it left to recite.

I decided to not stir the pot and went off on my own. 'I need to

do this by myself', I said valiantly. They appeared to have bought it. I played it off as me having to maintain my pride as a man. None of them could raise any opposition to that, so I bought myself some precious time to myself. For now.

That is when the absence of someone in particular happened to cross my mind. I hadn't seen much of Ba'el at all since after I had woken up. Making an attempt while I was still covered in bandages she's hardly shown her face at all. I heard the girls speak of her, but I had not laid my eyes on her since we last we all ate together two nights before. The sneaking suspicion that she's up to something crossed my mind and that's enough to convince me I had to get on top of it before she got on top of me.

As if fate herself were conspiring to keep my mind on such thoughts, the next corner I took on my usual route led me right into two people rutting. Right there in the hallway. One of Malco's soldiers with his pants around his ankles and a maid with her skirt hiked up. I remember seeing that guy before. Although I couldn't see the girls face, I could recognize the hem of her skirt. That's all I had to go off of, because half her body is through the wall. That would have given me pause had I not seen the ghosts around here doing it so often. It's almost comical to see nothing other than her waist and below. Not that she had legs to speak of. A wispy ghost tail replaced them.

Without another care in the world, the knight grunted with each shake of his hips. He swished his hand through the immaterial behind of the maid to boot. No impact, no meaty whack, but the sentiment appeased the ghost whose muffled cries of pleasure came from the other side of the wall. After getting an eyeful—and earful—I ducked back behind the corner. A few deep breaths to calm my nerves and I lurched away as silent as could be.

“Great. That throws a wrench into everything,” I grumbled, continuing down the hallway I had always turned left at.

Castles like these never have a straightforward design. All the better to confuse the enemy assailing them. I could spend a whole month here and still get turned around and lost. And getting lost in this place was asking for trouble.

It didn't take long for it to fine me as I turned another corner and saw two of Hyria's royal guard. Two skeletons in full gear and halberds slung over their shoulders. They were an improvement over the design that were fresh out of the ground during the battle weeks ago. Full

plate and chainmail. No longer were they wearing rusty metal and decaying cloth. Only the most prim and proper complete with tabards flying vivid colors would do. That did not exclude the mandatory showing of thigh, abdomen, cleavage and whatnot. They weren't near skeletal enough for their name's sake. Parts of them were actually bone, usually the arms, legs, hands or feet, maybe a bit of the ribcage too. Those parts were often covered in ectoplasm which formed a sort of faux flesh that is slightly translucent. Why? Because they had to have well endowed feminine features. Monster Lord's orders.

Their eyes were hidden by shadow cast by the brim of their stahlhelm-like helmets, but I could watch as their faces let out a loud 'hup' in unison. The heels of their plate boots clanked together as they slammed the base of their halberds against the floor. To top it all off they threw out a pair of roman salutes with their free hand. I was still taken off guard and mustered a raised hand to greet them in kind. That's when I noticed the smiles on their faces. They were rather unprofessional about it, considering the textbook military salutes which did not mesh well at all with their demeanor. I looked downward and saw what the fuss was about. The bulge at my crotch couldn't be any clearer an admission.

Not about to let the embarrassment sink in for another second I quickly turned another left. A couple of giggles had me turn my head back around where I saw the two girls with hands raised to hide their grins while whispering to one another. Once they saw me looking back they squealed with delight and scurried away to continue their patrol. Tittering and gossiping like school-children all the while.

“He was so looking at me,” one said.

“You, miss ironing board? No, he was looking at me!” the other retorted.

In my haste I took another wrong turn and saw a whole platoon of them marching by. They were heading in another direction, but I caught the attention of one who swiveled her head completely around toward me. I ducked back behind cover, but then I heard the whole marching coloum come to a stop. Their chittering echoed down the hallway. Their formation broken and coming closer. Trepidation and excitement in their voices.

There weren't any patrols near my room for a reason. One thing I could rely on the girls for was to keep these other girls at bay.

I looked left and right for an escape route. That's when I noticed a rather strange looking door on the opposite side of the hallway. It didn't look like any of the others. Wrong size, wrong color, wrong type and grain of wood. Not nearly fancy and opulent enough. A door that ought to be on some shack in the woods instead. Nothing else came close enough, so like some celebrity would dive out the back entrance to avoid a throng of fan-girls, I flung the door open. Throwing caution to the wind I dove inside and slammed it shut behind me.

It is dark inside, with nothing more than a single candle light flickering halfway down a set of stairs below me. I shut my mouth and tried listening for the gaggle of girls, but heard nothing at all. No chatting, no thump of footsteps or armor and weapons clanging together. Complete silence. All except the sound coming from down below. Another moment wasted could see the door fling open and send me sprawling onto the floor surrounded by horny skeletons, so I cautiously went deeper and descend the stone staircase.

I passed the only lit candle and quickly came to the bottom of the stairs. Through a shabby wooden door the sounds murmured through, and with nowhere else to go, I pushed it open. The room beyond was hard to describe. It's not large, no more square footage than a standard apartment flat. Two, no three rooms maximum. A main room, and maybe a small closet and bathroom off to the side. Cluttering the room were all manner of things scientific. At a glace it looked like some kind of old medieval laboratory. With glass vials in all shapes and sizes with fire burning, liquids percolating and distilling. Along the walls were shelves and bookcases jammed pack with books and loose sheets of paper. And then the smell hit me. Nothing sterile, not even close. Sulphur was the most predominant among them. Something acidic as well? Yet none of it held my attention greater than its sole occupant.

At the far end of the room, struggling to reach something high up on a shelf, stood a little girl. With her back turned to me all I could make out was hair of brown and silver. Adorned with a pair of morbid goat skulls into twin tails. A pair of massive horns sprouting up from the top of her head. One of which is cracked; it could be none other than Ba'el.

“Why—did—I—make—it—so—high?” She grumbled, each jump punctuated with a word. “I could start from scratch again, but that would take—No. I'll have to remember to make a ladder instead. Grr, how embarrassing. This never used to be a problem.”

In vain she tried reaching for a book half pulled from its neighbors. Her wooly paws could do nothing more than graze it each time. A white cloak wrapped around her shoulders swayed back and forth with each attempt, the clatter of her hooves clopping against the floor again and again. I slithered up behind her and plucked the book free. I handed it to her waiting hands which grasped it greedily without a second thought.

“Thank you,” she sighed.

Ba'el jerked once, coming to a complete stop. She stood still for a moment. It took her a second to process what happened before finally turning her head until her eyes were level with my stomach.

“Sorry, I suppose I should have—”

“AHHHHH!” she yelped while jumping backward.

She didn't weigh much, but she could throw around more than enough force. Her back slammed into the bookshelf and jostled a few of the tomes free which came crashing down. A few bounced off her head before she drew the one I'd given her to her chest. Her eyes glared at me with wide eyed anger until they recognized me and softened with more apprehension than fury.

“—Knocked?”

“What are you—Why are you—How are you?” She stammered, but the answer came to her on its own soon enough. “Right. The pact. Great.” Ba'el grumbled with drooping shoulders. “It's still the weekend, right?” she said raising her head to finally look me in the eyes.

I cocked an eyebrow, “Have you been locked away in here since the last time we all had dinner together?”

“And how long ago was that?”

“... Two days ago.”

“Oh~~It's been two days,” she seethed a sigh of relief through her teeth. “That all? Nothing to get worked up over.”

She let her guard back down, and that's when I saw she was hardly wearing anything at all under that cloak of hers... On second thought that sounds rather impressive since she usually wears next to

nothing at all. Plucking them off seemed to be her idea of casual Friday. Instead of that metal bikini armor, she had nothing more than a black silk, t-string, micro bikini. Too much bare skin. White, unblemished, soft and slightly flushed to a rosy hue. I shook my head shoo those thoughts away.

With no trace of apprehension on her face, the baphomet walked past me and leaped up on a stool by the central work bench. Upon a closer look, the bags underneath her eyes told me she likely hasn't slept at all the last two days either.

“That's all you have to say? You've been missing for two days!”

“Relax Laven,” she waved her hand dismissively and then cracked open the book's spine and began tracing her claw across the pages. “When you've been around as long as I have a couple of days is hardly anything in comparison.”

“That doesn't change the fact that you look terrible. You haven't slept once the last two days, have you?”

“I've been busy,” she said with her nose still buried in the book.

I approached and stole a glance over her shoulder. A decision I very quickly regretted. I could not make heads of tails of what was written on the pages, or what language they were in, but they moved about the page as if each letter and rune were liquid. It caused a sharp throbbing migraine.

“Whoa whoa whoa!” Ba'el screeched as she quickly slammed the book shut. “Didn't your mother ever teach you it's rude to read over someone's shoulder?”

Ba'el tossed it over her shoulder without a care in the world. I winced instinctively, expecting it to come crashing down into something fragile, but the sound of it landing anywhere, into anything, never actually came.

“What the hell was that?” I cried while massaging my temples.

“You ever try to read in a dream before? Something like that.”

“Oh god, don' tell me I've strayed into someone's head again.”

Ba'el chuckled briefly then explained, “You stumbled into my workshop. My wizard's workshop. My own little piece of inter-dimensional space. No master of the arcane is worth her snuff without it. Carved fresh and wholesale from the astral plane... And no, don't worry, I didn't siphon a bunch of magic from Yaleria's leyline to make it. No siree.”

“You probably shouldn't have not brought that last bit up,” I said.

Ba'el stared back at me with a blank expression. Then her eyes slid guiltily away.

“Whoops.”

How do you steal mana? Is it like water? I don't think you can get in trouble for collecting rain water in a barrel. If it were that simple it doesn't explain why Ba'el is so worked up about it. She's going through all this trouble to hide what is going on in here. I decided to interrogate her further.

“You stole mana? Is that why you are hiding? Waiting till things will blow over?”

“I didn't steal anything. It's out there in the open. Shooting up into space and raining back. That Princess and her minions can only use so much of it to raise the dead, so I scraped some extra frosting off the side. No one is gonna mind... More importantly no one is gonna notice unless you say something, so keep quiet about it!”

“Just because they don't know who is doing it doesn't mean they are not going to mind,” I sighed. “I'm going to regret asking this... Why go through all this trouble?”

Ba'el puffed her cheeks out in protest and began to explain.

“Because I need some private space to conduct my research!” She yelled, throwing her arms up into the air. “Spells, alchemy, the whole of it. Did you expect me to cram myself into a tent and do my business? No way. No how. And since we gotta be moving out soon I figured it was now or never to get some work done. Maybe then we could afford to set up in a nice inn now and then. Not everywhere we go has a bounty on our heads... Now that I think of it,

I've never so much as seen a single poster!”

“Because those after our heads are part of secret societies. They don't advertise.”

“Besides the point. I already got orders to fill. So if you'd let me finish, I'll treat you to some fat liver.”

The way she said orders sounded rather sleazy. With all the equipment set up the way it is I could not help but picture of methamphetamine lab. And with her piece said, Ba'el went back to burying her nose inside the book. It was a bit unnerving to see her acting earnest about something. She might actually be the kind of girl who takes her work seriously if and when she could be bothered to. Yet that wasn't enough to scratch that itch I had in the back of my head, so I came right out and asked.

“You aren't using magic to make narcotics, are you?”

“No, Laven, I am not synthesizing drugs,” she snapped. “Aphrodisiacs mostly. It may surprise you to hear that there are more guys not women who were—a couple weeks ago—rotting in the ground than there are. A tonic to get the blood flowing here, a love potion there, the market is on the ground floor and I'm set to make a killing.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose while trying to swallow that last tidbit down. If I didn't know better after watching all these cheery lovestruck undead girls running around; I'd be horrified to hear that they had to stoop to these measures to snag a guy. My feelings were complicated by the fact that I can sympathize with how they feel. They look and act so very human for being walking corpses. If you closed your eyes and listened you would never know the difference. They were like horny high schoolers hungering for the spongy bit that's part of another type of head.

“And that pays for all my side projects.”

The way she said 'project' left me more disturbed than when she said 'orders'. I'm not sure if I'll be able to get a word in edge wise like this. I'm not sure I want to know what she's means either.

“Well. It's good to see you are alright,” I shrugged. I gotta get back to the room. You make sure to come out for tonight's dinner and get a couple hours of sleep.”

Ba'el made no move to stop me. That too left me uneasy. She didn't stir when I had my hand on the door. If she's hoping to catch me with my guard down there's no way she'd be fast enough to stop me now. I took a quick glace backward to see her still studying before swinging the door open. But it wasn't the stairwell I had come through which I nearly stepped into. It's quite different.

I had one foot in another room I had never seen before. Sitting right in front of me was a woman. Pallid gray skin, light blue hair, naked save the see through nightie. A generous pair of tits suspended on her chest, clear as day with a comb in mid stroke through her shoulder length hair. I recognized that face too. Medae, Hyria's left-hand woman. Sitting down on a stool in front of her canopy bed.

A quick glance to my left and my right made me realize I hadn't come through the door to her room. I looked down and saw some sort of makeup cabinet. With her sitting in front of it, I must have opened the mirror? Nothing added up. I tepidly rolled my eyes back and Medae was still starting wide eyed at me. Frozen like a deer caught in the head-lights. My eyes couldn't help but be pulled down. By gravity, virtue of its attraction to round stellar objects. Her eyes and then it dawned upon her. She looked back up, with tears in her eyes. That's when I sprang back into action and slammed the door shut.

My heart was in my throat as I desperately pressed my back up against the door in a no doubt futile effort to endure the inevitable... Yet it never came. No thunderous explosion. No sundering of stone or shower of wooden splinters as I flew across the room. Nothing more than Ba'el laughing hysterically.

“Pft fu fu fu fu,” she cackled, rocking back and forth on her stool. “The look on your face! I can't—I'm dying here! Ah ha ha ha haaaa ha ha!” She exploded into another fit of laughter.

“What the hell was that!?” I bellowed.

“It's a pocket dimension, Laven. It can be anywhere, but nowhere at the same time. Even so, that doesn't mean it could be, or go, anywhere. It's gotta be anchored, so I anchored to the castle. Nice, old and solid with a nice magic ambiance. Just right,” she said, making an OK sign with her hand while breathing in—what must be to her—the savory atmosphere. “That means its entrance is intangible. Like liquid. Hidden to the casual observer. You could see it since you and I are bound by that pact, but that doesn't mean you can open it and go wherever you want.”

“Are you trying to tell me I'm trapped in—”

I stopped myself short, but likely not short enough.

Ba'el smiled and reassured me, “I could let you out whenever I—”

Her cheery disposition stopped dead in its tracks. Whenever I want. Her eyes spoke volumes. That cute little face of her twisted into a mischievous grin. I instinctively reached for the door again.

“And I'd warn you not to try that again,” Ba'el said, wagging her finger in the air. “You might open a door in the ceiling above a pit full of slavering ghouls. I'm not sure I could pull you out. Not before they are on your dick so fast and drain you to the point where you'd need another month in bed to walk it off.”

She waved her hand across the workbench. There was a second unused stool on my side of the table. I weighed the two options against one another. In the end there's no other choice but to play along. Ba'el watched me with that grin plastered on her face—hand on cheek and elbow on the table—as I plopped myself down.

“And what do you want?” I asked for formality's sake.

“Come now, Laven. Don't be so cold. Our relationship isn't so mercenary. No, let's talk about what we both want.”

“A nice moonlit walk around the castle courtyard.”

“Oh, and candlelight dinner on the balcony would be—No!” She yelled, whiplashed between opposing emotions. “Stop trying to play the innocence card. I could smell the pheromones oozing off you the moment you came in here!”

“But... I surprised you.”

Ba'el groaned, “Figuratively! Did you think you could prance about MY room with that chub in your pants and get away with it, you fucking tease!?”

She slammed her fist into the table with a bang. For a moment I thought the poor wooden board would snap in two. I recoiled and nearly fell off my stool.

“Laven, my boy, I got all the mana I could ever need. But

mana is mana. It has its properties and it has its limits. I'll need something only you can provide to get my workshop running full steam."

I knew where she was going and I'm about ten seconds ahead of her. I put my hands on the table and pushed myself back onto my feet.

"You got a cup, a beaker, or something I could use?" I sighed in resignation. "I'll use the room over there and—"

Ba'el threw up a paw and commanded me to stop, "No, that wont do. That wont do it all."

"You are NOT getting it yourself."

"Let's not dwell on your past mistakes here, Laven," she giggled.

I was not amused that she had fond memories of that. Not that I remember much, but the sinking feeling in my heart and the skittery nerves still surrounded episode I manged to repress. There would not be any time for me to dwell on it any longer after she snapped her fingers together. I jumped back in surprise as the workbench slid out of the way of its own accord. Ba'el stood up next and back kicked the stool out of the way. She took a couple of lascivious steps toward me and then fell over backwards. A cot sprung up from the floor and the downy mattress and comforter broke her fall. Now she's sitting on the edge of a small single bed. Her perch no more than a couple feet away, right in the middle of the workshop.

"Now now now. What to do with you," she cooed.

Despite her best efforts to appear in control and mature I could clearly see her tail swish back and forth. Its movements were exactly like that of an excited dog and it made her harder to take seriously. It wasn't until she made her first demand that I realized how dire the situation had become.

"First, take off your clothes," Ba'el commanded.

I glared at her. That did nothing but make her happier. Which made me more frustrated and her happier still. A vicious cycle.

"I got all the time in the world, Laven," She said mirthfully. "I spent forty years straight being cloistered up around dusty old nuns

and snot nosed little kids. You wont win this battle, so take off your damn pants already."

My hands balled up into fists while she materialized an empty wine glass from nothing and pulled out a vintage bottle from a glowing circle in the air.

"And do it slow," she added while pouring herself a full glass before tossing the bottle into another magic circle as if it were a mobile trash bin.

Now I had some serious reservations about the options I had weighed out. Perhaps diving head first into a ghoul pit wouldn't be so bad. Maybe I could crawl my way out. Maybe they'd still be asleep and not notice me landing... Then again, the smart decision would be sticking with the devil you do know. I knew whatever rules for this game Ba'el set up could not be later reneged.

Starting with the belt I unbuckled the latch and slowly freed it from the rings around my waist. I watched as Ba'el's ears flapped in delight at the sound of leather on denim. She hid her face behind the wine glass, but I saw she was already flushing red a bit before she downed a drop of that wine. And I also remember her saying that she cannot get drunk the same way other things would with enough alcohol.

Next I stepped on the heel of each shoe and kicked them aside. That freed up the cuffs of my pants, so I unzipped, unbutton and kicked them off. Ba'el crossed her legs back over the other way as she watched, the look on her face a little crooked as she tried hard to keep her lips pursed. I could almost see the steam billowing out her flared nostrils.

"Don't forget the socks," she said with her eyes fixated on my crotch.

I let one long seething breath through my teeth and hopped on one leg and then the other to pull my socks off. Meanwhile, Ba'el let the cloak slip off her shoulders and cast it aside.

She was right about one thing and that's the tight constraints of my boxers. It's been half mast behind my fly for a while now. But it wouldn't stay that way for long. The demon before me seductively slipped one claw under the strap holding her bra in place and slowly peeled it away. There's nothing to bounce into place. Nothing more than an A-cup, yet the nipple reveal still caused my throat to go dry.

The way she moved her hands down the curse of her waist and placed them on her hips while she stared at me also caused a twitch at my groin in spite of myself.

“You try to act all detached and cool, but you are still a man after all,” Ba'el giggled. “A trim waist and a solid pair of hips and you melt like butter on the stove.”

If I ignored her figure I'd be worried about the guards bursting down the door at any moment and drag me away. She is petite with an undeniably youthful body, but the devil was in the details. Those highlights which prompted the baser instincts to action. That seductive gaze, filled to the brim with confidence, belonged on an older woman. Seeing it plastered there didn't help. What put me into check is the presence of the blush that belied a degree of vulnerability. Enough to advertise a warning, but also a hook to reel you in.

Something hit me right in the face while I pulled off my shirt. Timed perfectly to the moment I freed my head from the collar, It was light, but made an audible smack on impact. I peeled it from my eyes and unfolded it. A black pair of silk panties. A very salacious pair with hardly any fabric at all and still warm to the touch. I looked up to see Ba'el sitting there completely naked. Her thighs squeezed together with knees positioned to the side so they'd strategically block her nethers from my sight.

She chittered with glee at the look on my face and said, “You are gonna need those.”

It wasn't the sight of her freshly worn undies that got to me and had me nearly shaking. No. What got to me is the smell. Vaginal secretions. Lubrication. Love juices. Whatever word appropriate for it, the assault against my better judgment hit like a battering ram. Ba'el was turned on. She acted out the mistress role the best she could, but the girl burned hotter than I. Gushing with enthusiasm and it is infectious.

“Now. Beat it,” she said it with heavy breaths.

With a fleeting moment of clarity I began to turn around for the door. That got quite the reaction out of her. The joke didn't go down well with her at all.

“Stop stop stop! Stop right there!” She screamed. “Not you. It!” She said scrambling for words to clarify herself.

Her twintails were now disheveled. She panted hard, but not seductively at all. I sensed a degree of desperation in it as well. As if she wouldn't know what to do with herself if I did leave. Where would all that pent up lust go? That's a question both of us pondered for a moment. We knew it the moment we looked each other in the eye.

“Don't you dare act clever now,” Ba'el chided me with a grin on her face. “Yeah, very funny. You can ditch the underwear as punishment.”

I had come so far already, but wasn't willing to lower my last line of defense so easily. That glare in her eye was serious though. Her joking grin had no other reason to be there but to veil that threat. With no other recourse at hand I slipped my thumbs under the waistband and pulled them down over my hips. They were free to fall to the floor after that, along my member. Ready to betray me in an instant as it stood at full mast.

She wiped her mouth once with her wooly wrist and gave the order, “Wrap that around your dick and have at it.”

“You want to watch me masturbate?” I had to ask.

“No. I order you to masturbate, so no more lollygagging.”

A strange thought came to me. One I had not had for as long as I could remember. That wasn't for long, because I only had about three months worth of memories. Yet in all that time I cannot recall ever doing the deed. I've been hounded, serviced and delivered a proper outlet for all that time. It must have shown on my face because Ba'el's face showed disbelief.

“You aren't gonna tell me you were some sort of choir boy now, are you?”

“No, I—”

“Then stop holding out on me,” Ba'el said as she took another sip from her wine glass.

Using some girl's used panties as an aid made me feel dirty. Like some sort of creep who had snagged it from the rest hanging off the clothes line. It's warm to the touch, but the wet sensation on my cock unfamiliar. Not unlike a chemical reaction my penis went harder than before. Almost painfully so. Engorged with blood and trying to push past its limits. A firm grip to keep the wild beast at bay was all I

could do to alleviate it. Ba'el's slick liquids soothing it no different from an aloe scented panacea.

My teeth grit together as I started slow. With cloth and string her underwear had enough to wrap around my shaft and nothing else. A little help from my foreskin and the resounding rhythm of shifting skin and flexing muscle soon filled the room. Ba'el watched on, positioned as a would be empress. Her eyes studying my every move, yet her cheeks flushed with girlish delight. A melodic humming from her throat sung her own praises as her very demeanor both laughed at me and encouraged me onward.

"It is very handsome under proper lighting, if I may say so," Ba'el said as she appraised both it and my efforts. "Your technique is woefully rusty, however. I suppose you cannot be faulted. Those girls have been pampering you for so very long."

An unexpected sensation had me on my toes immediately. Something hard pressing up against the underside of my scrotum. One of Ba'el's legs were raised up. I looked down for but a moment and saw her hoof playfully juggling my sack up and down. Raised a little higher and the pain would no doubt be tremendous.

"Don't. Stop," she said, the meaning behind those words came across very clear.

I am very grateful at this moment that goats are very surefooted creatures. She let me come down off my toes, but did not pull back her foot. She had no toes to flex with, but undulated her ankle to rub the smooth keratin surface. Exactly like running it across a large fingernail. Ba'el gently lifted the sac up and then let it back down. She teased back and forth between each ball as she goaded them on to empty their loads. Too afraid to stop, I grit my teeth and continued stroking.

The time to my grand finish was fast approaching, but Ba'el raised her foot higher than before and ordered me to stop. With my balls stuck between a rock and a hard place I had no choice but to pull them away as if I had a gun pointed at me.

"That's enough," she said while finishing the last of her wine.

What she is up to was obvious. A few more seconds and I would have been done. At least she put her foot back down onto the floor. Relief washed over me to hear it clop down onto the hard cobblestone floor. Yet that freed them up to endure a fierce blue balling instead. I threw an angry glance at her, but that made her grin

with delight.

“I can't have you messing it all up at the end, you amateur,” she snickered.

Her left hand shot out quicker than my reflexes would allow. Her small wooly mitt grabbed hold of my shaft with a vice grip. For a second I feared she'd squeeze my blood sausage till it burst. Her grip was stronger than I would ever dare to handle my own junk. But this Ba'el, so she could clamp down stronger than I could to begin with. Along with the soft sensation of her shaggy wool that ran from her hand to her elbows, the feeling of warmth was something else. My dick felt locked into a tube of warm velvet.

Her hand could hardly cover as much surface area as I could. Using the slick black silk and her own fluffy paws she expertly used the muscles in undulation. Up to the base of the glans and back down to the base. Totally unlike the earnest but clumsy hand-jobs I have received before. Ba'el knew exactly what she was doing.

My knees were getting a bit weak. I stole a quick glance back down and saw her green eyes were beginning to glow and pulse with her heartbeat. A spell of some sort, but I wasn't prepared for whatever it would be at all. I couldn't last more than fifteen seconds of her work. She went full speed within the last three and I could feel the rush of electricity from my hips to the tip of my penis. Ba'el held the lip of her wine glass to my member and started pulling at it like you would a cow's teat.

One money shot, two and many more. Spurts of white liquid right into her waiting glass. I grew concerned after the first few and worried when it wouldn't stop. Fear of falling over while she had my dick in her grip is all that kept me standing upright. I would have gone weak enough in the knees to keel over otherwise. There was more than a few teaspoons in there now. It quickly approached half-full. That should be impossible for all but the most staged and exaggerated scenes in some cheesy porn flick. Yet with magic these things were possible. My balls were an endless fountain of semen. At least she decided to stop when it did half fill her glass. I'm not sure if I could have survived much longer.

Ba'el finally released her grip and let my cock flop back down in a defeated state. Meanwhile, like some perverted sommelier, she twirled the glass around and watched the vicious fluid slosh about. She lifted the rim to her lips and took a small sip. Every muscle in her body

relaxed immediately. Her ears flapped with joy and her tail made a rhythmic patting sound as it slapped against the bed.

“Exquisite,” she said with glowing cheeks. “I'd love to bottle it away. But—”

She dropped the classy act and tipped the bottom of the glass up. Ba'el chugged the rest. I watched as her dainty throat pulsed with each gulp of the epiglottis.

“Ahhhh~” she sighed while lowering her chin and tossing the empty glass aside.

Her green eyes lit up like they were now irradiated. It was a rather unsettling thing to see, but it wasn't a sight that didn't dissuade my dick from standing right back to attention. Seeing her chug down my seed had my male instinct's full attention once again.

“Oh~ho~What a naughty boy you are,” Ba'el cooed at the sight of it.

With a resounding clop of hooves, the goat jumped to her feet. The bed seemingly vanished behind her without a trace. How I did not know, because it happened in the corner of my eyes. My full attention was at the eerie, hungry, glow in her eyes. And then she struck. She shoved me with both hands which sent me flying off my feet. Thankfully I hit something soft. My head cushioned by a pile of pillows. The bed which had been in front of me was now behind me. But before I could make a move of my own some living threads of silk snaked their way through the air and wrapped themselves around my wrists and ankles. A moment later and I was drawn to each of the four bed posts.

Now I experienced an episode of déjà vu. Ba'el crawled onto the bed, brushing her naked body against my own ever so lightly. Her face came closer to my own as she sat her behind down on my abdomen.

“Let's cut to chase, hmm?” Ba'el said with the look of an impatient predator.

She shifted her weight and began to squat over my chest while she fished for and grabbed hold of my hard member. She wrenched at it, stood it upright, and lowered herself onto it. Her hairless, lipless mound kissed the tip of my glans which slowly parted her folds until her little bud and pink flaps were exposed. Her nethers drooled all over

my dick and had it coated in lubricant before I had it inside properly. Not that she allowed that. Ba'el lowered herself no lower. She coiled herself around my tip. Teasingly at first, refusing to commit any further than the ridge of the glans. She had the nerve to spin around so that she was now in the reverse cowboy position.

The daemon giggled as I struggled in vain against my restraints. She put her hands on her hips and began to swivel and grind back and forth and then grind in circles. I watched helplessly as her round little butt danced in front of me. Her tail swishing to and fro as if to tease me. At no time during did she decide to indulge me by plunging herself any further. My rod followed obediently the whole time, begging to be serviced properly. Meanwhile, the little girl caressed her paws across her smooth white skin. Across her tummy, up to cupping her small breasts, the collar bone, up the nape her neck and across her flush red cheeks before finally tousling her twin tails about. A sensual display meant to goad me.

Her intention was to have me beg. She would be sorely disappointed. I still had the presence of mind to notice she had made a fatal error. While my arms and legs were restrained, Ba'el had failed to strap me in fully. I put the last of my energy reserves into raising my hips as far as they would go. My back arced and I could feel my spear be plunged into the fleshy depths. My teeth grit together as it squeezed me harder than her hands had done so before. Warmer too, by a country mile.

My back couldn't stay bent like this forever and I dropped down soon enough. That sneak attack didn't get the stimulation I wanted though. I dropped back down she and she was dragged along with me. Between the friction of our genitals locked together, through the grip her had on mine, there would be no escape for either of us. Yet it wasn't just me whose spine contorted. Ba'el's eyes were wide open with shock, glazed over slightly as her body tensed up then convulsed as if an electric current had been sent through it.

There could be no mistaking it; that's an orgasm. I've become quite good on noticing these things. To prove it absolutely, the girl lost her balance and fell over backward. It's a good thing she weighs nearly nothing, because all that weight came crashing down on my chest. My nose was treated to the scent of sweet perfume coming from her hair and that was enough to unchain any lingering restraints.

Among those were the ribbons binding my arms. The fabric loosened along with Ba'el's motor control. My hands crawled up Ba'el's

smooth thighs to her mons. A quick check confirmed we were indeed still connected. We were exchanging body heat. Too hot for either of us to handle as we were now coated in slippery sweat. She spasmed once as I grazed my hand across her clitoris. Yet that was not my final destination. My probing hands ran across her hips and up her waist; over her breasts and brushing her cute little erect nipples. Meanwhile, I kept huffing in the sweet womanly smell radiating from the nape of her neck and behind the ears. Each breath I took sent shivers down her spine and made it difficult for the girl to recompose herself.

I could sense this window of opportunity would not last forever, however. My next move would have to be decisive, so when my hands passed her breasts I wrapped them underneath her armpits and grabbed hold on her horns. The sensation when grip clamped down on her broken horn brought her back, but her protests were meaningless and she was too late to break free. I grabbed hold of them like the handlebars on a motorcycle. With my feet still bound, and the girl weighing down on my torso, the only option I have is pulling her up and then push her back down.

“Ahhh~wait, hold on~!” Ba'el cried out between moans of ecstasy.

A few awkward pumps later and I settled into a rhythm. Slow at fist, but after about twenty seconds I was able to pick up the pace. It felt impossibly good. Her vaginal walls were like another pair of hands that held on tight. She herself was very light, but it's hard to pull her back out after thrusting myself in. Down below had a whole other mind of its own and it desperately demanded I oblige it.

Ba'el grabbed hold my wrists, yet did not try to pry them off. Perhaps she couldn't. Perhaps she merely broke down and resigned and accepted the pleasure she received. It was now of all times that her potty mouth is absent. She filled the air with high pitched, melodious moans instead. They carried over myself, which was fine, because I'm sure they were ugly animalistic grunts that would spoil the mood if I had to listen to them. Six six six might be the address of this place, but its me who is the beast.

I picked up the pace as I neared my limits. My speed reached its limits due to the awkward positioning the two of us found ourselves in. Yet I could not finish the deed on my own. Ba'el's pussy would not allow it. As she reached her second climax the pressure inside made the friction so intense that I could not move. She caught me at the depth of my final plunge and my groin took it as cue to dump

everything I had.

Whatever magic she had used before was still in effect too. An improbable amount of semen gushed out and filled her. Her little body could not possibly contain a full cup's worth of seed. Her mons bulged out a little before it started oozing out from the gaps of her labia where we were connected. It flowed out like a waterfall and stained the sheets we laid upon. All the while I closed my eyes and focused on not dying. Ba'el's howls of delight pieced my ears while my body felt as if it were turning inside out. Our bodies tensed together and went limp together.

My attempts to flee after all that were foiled again. Despite cumming hard, twice, Ba'el refused to let me go. I rolled over onto my side, but could not part our sweaty bodies. Now we were both laying on our sides with her the very little spoon and I the big one. Our breathing was hot and heavy. Each huff I let out caused her ear to twitch in the cutest way. I saw her eyes for the first time too as I loomed over her. They were unfocused, but I could still see the spark of fight in them.

I reached down and wrapped my arm between her thighs and lifted one of her legs into the air. My other arm I burrowed underneath and wrapped it around her chest. I cupped her small breast and held onto her tight. I hooked one leg across her other and thrust myself once more into the breach. It parted ways for me as easily as before, yet it resisted every time I pulled out. Assuaged the moment when I thrust back in.

“Dar Fruk—Ahh~Iyuk—Hmmm~!” Ba'el muttered ominous words beneath her breath between intermittent moans.

The way those words carried in the air and burned in the ear drums told me they were the of Infernal language. They were words that had an actual smell to them and smelt like brimstone. If she were trying to utter them now, the one thing she could be trying to do was cast a spell. Likely to reverse the tables. I could not allow that to happen. I tilted her head back and swooped in, so that my lips pressed up against her own. Ba'el's expression turned sour as I gently bit down on her upper lip. Her carefully chosen words became jumbled and whatever she tried to do fizzled out as the dark rumblings faded and the smell faded away. A little more prodding and she reciprocated against her best efforts not to. I grabbed hold of her tongue quickly with my lips and pinned it down with my tongue.

Ba'el gripped the sheets hard and held on tight. Her other free paw grasped onto my cheek and held tight into the side of my head. The mohair smooth wool caressed it softly. A warm soothing sensation which was very tender and gentle to the touch. Unbecoming of the one from which it came.

Another uncharacteristic thing about this creature from hell: weak to something so vanilla as a simple kiss. Completely blown away by a little rough snogging. The latter of which came more naturally as the boundary between our two bodies became harder to define as we smashed into one another roughly. Her resistance was all but done at that point and her hips began to compliment my own movements. It brought the act of sex to the next level: love making. The rebellious look in her face had all but vanished and melted into one which was shamelessly amorous.

Three times in and I thought it would take longer, but the added sensations dispelled that notion rather quickly. Maybe it was the position we were in as well, because I could feel another climax coming on. My dick flooded with blood and bulged to record girth. Ba'el's muffled yelps rang out inside my head while our lips were locked till the final moment. Sweet whispers spurring me on to cum deep and cum a lot carried my aching hips home and I slid in hard one more time.

It ended with a repeat of the others. Pulse after pulse delivered spurt after spurt of white gold. Far more than could conceivably be held within testes of that size. I had plunged in and pushed most of what had been there out and the rest into her womb. Now it bulged her tummy slightly once more while the excess gushed out where we joined. Half a minute more of that, unending. My throat was dry. Not really a surprise I'd feel so dehydrated. Every last ounce of energy I had was spent and sleep began to over take me. Ba'el lay in front of me, defeated, exhausted like me. The condition of the bed appeared to bother neither of us as we both lost consciousness is each other's embrace.

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I had no way of knowing how long I had been there, or how long I had been out cold for. As I cautiously pushed open the door back into the outside world there was no way of knowing these little things you so often take for granted. Yaleria is still plunged in eternal darkness and it was darkness I returned to. I turned my head left and turned my head right and saw the exact same hallway I had entered

Ba'el's domain from. With her still asleep, she could no longer interfere with me leaving and scramble where the exit would lead me. I could see no one else and I could hear no one either. It's safe to exit and I did exactly that.

But as I closed the door behind me quietly, the moment I let go of the door handle I felt a strange sensation behind me. Turning around I saw that the door had vanished into thin air. A stone wall behind me and nothing more.

“Laaaaaaven!” A voice came bungling down the hallway.

I dropped down into a defensive crouch, but it was not needed because Rose is who stood at the end of the hallway. She hadn't been there a moment before.

“Laven? Where have you been?” She said with a worried expression as she bounded down the hallway toward me.

My hands came up to try catching her, but she seized them in her claws once she came to a skidding halt in front of me. That concerned look on her face gave me heartburn. It didn't stay that way for long once she had a good hold on me. She flashed me a toothy smile with beaming eyes filled with glee.

“I-I went for a walk,” I said, offering the half truth.

I'm too tired to explain everything that had transpired. To say nothing of having to explain inter-dimensional space to Rose notwithstanding.

“You were gone all afternoon. We were looking everywhere for you. Some guards said they saw you around here, but we couldn't find you. We thought the bats might have got you.”

She certainly did have her sword hanging at her waist and her armor on. Wait... There are bats on the prowl trying to capture me?

“We march all day, right? I have to get my body ready for that again,” I replied, with convincing white lie, if I must say so myself.

Rose tilted her head inquisitively and made an audible humming as she processed that thought. But a moment later she was smiling again. I internally sighed with relief. She bought it and that would save me some trouble.

“You are well enough for a hike—”

Oh no, I immediately regret my decision. I know where this is—

“—then we can resume our training!” she squealed with glee.

“No, Rose. Not now. I'm still recovering!”

“We have some time before dinner, so come on. Let's go. I'll spot for you. Let's build up that appetite!”

Rose kept her right hand glued to my left, turned about-face on her heels and started pulling me along to my doom. I dug my heels into the floor in vain. Now I was skiing atop the red carpets.

“Rose no!” I pleaded helplessly.

My presence of mind was a blur after that. My next coherent memory is sitting at a table surrounded with friends. Me and the girls were at the banquet hall where all the castle's guests had convened. We sat at our usual table, next to Hyria's royal one. Rose, Susan, Chris and myself. The conversation sure is lively, I thought, while I brushing caked salt from my forehead. I hadn't been granted a moment to wash myself after being subjected to Rose's regimen.

A dozen other conversations assailed the senses form all sides. Men and monsters all gathered together. Talking, flirting, making out with one another. Perhaps lively was the correct word to use after all. There's even live entrainment as a troop of wandering bards had come to play. Hyria had apparently offered them patronage. I'd say that because a lot of the undead girls were swooning all over them.

It certainly added a degree of culture. Beyond the thin veneer of civility there was a lot of unseemly acts of fornication going on. Meal times appeared to be one of the few breaks away from it. Besides sleeping. None of that appeared to bother Hyria. I caught a couple glimpses and she smiled back with that noble grace. If my eyes strayed wrong they'd come across Medae though. She shot me back a look that could kill. My eyes retreated as fast as they could and stared down at the floor.

“Do not fret, Laven,” Susan consoled in me. “The festivities here are informal. You will not draw ire from our host for your lack of decorum.”

Susan sat to my right and if she only she knew. So close yet so far. I could not bring myself to tell Susan about what had happened. I'd bear that cross alone.

Besides feeling like I could be killed at any moment, I felt like I was dying all over again. Sore muscles, aching bones, lightheadedness and a parched throat. My sole solace is the tall glass of ice water in front me. I could not empty it fast enough. An attentive ghost maid was always somehow behind me and ready to fill it back up again with a smile before she floated off somewhere again.

“That doesn't mean I couldn't use a bath. Hopefully before I start stinking the place up worse than an actual corpse,” I sighed.

“Oh oh oh!” Rose raised her arm into the air, bouncing in her seat across the table to my right. “I can—”

“My turn,” Minte said, from the opposite side of the table.

In her hands was a bucket and a sponge. Rose clicked her tongue. As combative as she was, the salamander had to play by the rules set in place ahead of time.

“Minte, don't bring those to the table!” Susan barked.

“I'm not comatose,” I blurted out in a tiff. “I can bath—”

Minte cast her eyes downward in shame and slowly lowered the bathing supplies back under the table. I felt Susan may have gone too far. The sight of Minte's antenna drooping down dejectedly had that effect on me.

I sighed, “Okay, so I am feeling a little more stiff than usual.”

Her antenna shot right back up to full attention and she nodded her head enthusiastically, but with her typical blank expression.

“And tomorrow, master,” Chris bellowed from across the table to my left. “On my flight back I spied the perfect vista in the North-west mountains—the ones that didn't blow up—and we could do some high altitude exercises. The fresh mountain air and sun would do you some goood, I'm sure.”

Chris could barely fit at the edge of the table she occupied. Staff had learned to steer well clear of her two. The wyvern's wings had a large zone of exclusion while she used them while talking

animatedly.

“We could pack a picnic too,” she snuck in at the end, looking down with a bashful expression.

That set of a cavalcade of bickering amongst them all while I sat there. Exhausted both physically, mentally and spiritually. I looked over to the seat on my left which was empty. Reserved for Ba'el, who had yet to come. The girls rotated seating arrangements to avoid having to fight over them. Those rules were set in stone, so no filling in vacancies were allowed. Not even if this would be the third meal Ba'el had skipped.

Trumpets heralded the arrival of the evening's meal. Zombie servant and servant carrying with them platters of whole roasted hog. Apple in the mouth and all. A resounding cheer went throughout the hall as the festivities intensified and the clatter of cutlery sounded like pre-dinner music.

“Ahh~I'm so hungry I could eat a whole one myself,” a voice sung out beside me.

As if appearing out of the very aether, Ba'el had filled the once empty seat.

“Ba'el?” I asked, as if doubting my own eyes.

All the other girls turned their attention at once and met the daemon with a chorus of greetings and smiles. Except for one.

“Finally decided to join us?” Susan replied, with venom in the tone of her voice.

“I love you too, you mutt,” Ba'el smiled back.

The mix of pleasantry with a barb threw Susan for a loop. She did not know whether to fire back or get simply get angry. Ba'el was certainly shining brighter than the sun. She's in a better mood then I'd ever seen her before. Susan opted for neither as she no doubt wished to avoid making a scene. She crossed her paws across her chest, turned up her nose and let out a harrumph instead.

“What kept you?” Rose inquired.

“I've been busy working on a project,” Ba'el replied.

“For two days straight? Are you almost finished?” Chris asked.

“Oh, I got a little help earlier, so I'd say so. I might be able to show you soon.”

I didn't like the look Ba'el had on her face as she stared at Chris. The wyvern appeared to be oblivious to it, but it didn't get passed me. Yet I couldn't muster the wherewithal to interject. With everyone together the dinner conversation became more livelier than before. Something missing had fallen into place and there was peace once more. Balance had been restored. I suppose I could enjoy it while it lasted. This is certainly an improvement from before.

As I reached for my knife I felt something up against my thigh. Rubbing, searching for the bulge underneath the inner thigh. I nearly jumped out of my seat. The knife nearly flying out of my hand, but I caught it in time.

“You alright?” Rose asked, concerned.

“Y-yeah,” I stammered. “Almost fumbled my knife, that's all. Ah ha ha ha.”

My laugh didn't put them at ease as I had hoped.

“If you drop any cutlery, the maids will replace it for you. Don't be so nervous,” Susan said.

“Of course. Of course,” I replied.

I looked to my left and there was Ba'el looking back up at me. A cheery grin on her face. Cute, yet nothing but a sheath to a dagger. Less mischievous than normal and more sincere. I thought I caught a glimpse of something familiar too... But... No. This is Ba'el. Let's not get too carried away.

Her decided to do just that though. Her paw stimulating my flaccid member and trying to coax it to an erection. I dared not say a word while a freshly cut slab of ham found its way to my plate. While Ba'el engaged in the lively dinner talk, the paw never left my thigh and never stopped prodding and probing my dick.

No. Nothing had improved at all.